

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

Being and Doing in Christ

Miles O'Neill

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Summary:

Miles O'Neill

Welcome to the letter written to the church of Ephesus. Ephesians is one of the most succinct, powerful, life-shaping books in the Bible. "Pound for pound Ephesians may well be the most influential document ever written", says one author. It is a book through which a new Christian can gain great insight into what it means to walk with God. It is also a book in which there are deep and rich theological truths that one could study for a lifetime.

About Ephesians, David Powlison writes: *"This is a letter to you about us and God. The point is clear: God has put us in Christ. You know this already; but you don't know. This is Christian faith 101; yet this is knowledge that surpasses knowing, far beyond anything we can ask or even imagine."* –*Seeing With New Eyes*, David Powlison.

If you are leading a small group with this study, your role will be to take the lessons that follow and use the framework according to the level and pace that your group can handle. You can add or delete questions in order to tailor the study to your particular group. Sit down ahead of time and go through the lessons yourselves. Use a red pen and write in the margins. What are the questions that you have as you read the letter alongside the lessons? Where would you want to go deeper, where would you want to simply read the comments included? (Read the included article 'Asking Christ Centered Questions' to gain valuable insight into asking good questions). Which of the articles included would you want to make sure that your group reads ahead of time or in the following week? There is a lot of room to use the study as a framework and make it your own. Furthermore, I highly recommend purchasing the Ephesians commentary in the [NIV Application Commentary](#) series. You can find it on Amazon for about \$15. It will help you gain rich insight into the letter and give you confidence as you lead through it.

In this study, you will find that I am attempting to focus on some key elements that are both explicit and implicit in the text. First of all, in coming to Ephesians, you can help them see a process of studying the Bible. You can help them see that context is hugely important to understanding the author's intentions. You can focus on certain details of the text but zoom out often to help them see where it fits into Paul's reasoning and the flow of the letter. Even more than that, where does the letter fit into the story of the whole Bible? This is the perhaps the number one weakness I find as students approach the Bible. They ignore the bigger picture and focus in on particular phrases often misinterpreting them in the course.

Secondly, you will see an intention to build a solid foundation in the Christian life on the Gospel, the good news of what Jesus has done for us. It is both the starting place and the continuing place from which all growth must take place. (As Tim Keller says, it is both the ABC's and the A to Z's of the Christian life). You will constantly see questions directed at both Paul's and the group member's motivation level. I am attempting to help you lead people to expose their hearts, NOT just their actions. You will see that Paul takes three chapters to develop the motivations of the heart before he gets to the main part of his practical ethical concerns of how to live as a Christian. So you must also help build a foundation in the beautiful Gospel of Christ's love and acceptance so that Christ becomes compelling in the process of change. Guilt, a standard of performance, pressure, a desire for a moral or satisfying life will never change a person's heart. Only as Christ becomes more beautiful and compelling will real, time enduring life-change occur! Sound difficult? It is! In fact you can't cause it. You can be a part and God wants to use you to do it, but relax, your part is just showing up being prepared. God promises to use His word to richly impact lives. The pressure is off so experience the freedom of the Gospel as you teach about the Gospel!

Finally, you will see that I attempt to ask some questions that will help your group grow in depth *together* as they grow deeper in their understanding of Christ. Pray often through the questions that help people reveal their hearts with one-another. As God exposes peoples' hearts, their sins, their hopes, dreams, fears and pains, an environment that can really promote deep change begins to form. As light opens up into people's lives, God surgically removes pain, pressure, and heartache and replaces them with joy and freedom. Take steps of faith and don't shy away from initiating intimate conversation where vulnerability can take place. And remember, you can only take your group where you are willing to go yourself.

At the end of the last lesson, I ask the following questions in review. You may want to keep them in the back of your mind during the whole study and even ask them of your group from time to time over the weeks you meet. They summarize the lessons that can be learned from the inspired words of this letter well.

- ✓ What have you learned about who God is?
- ✓ What have you learned about who you are?
- ✓ What have you learned about who others are?
- ✓ What have you learned about what you are called to?
- ✓ What heart motivations are there to follow Christ?
- ✓ Summarize how Paul proposes to help the Ephesians grow in unity and in Christ?

As you plot your course as a leader ahead, would you keep this prayer related to the study of Ephesians of David Powlison in his book [Seeing With New Eyes](#) before you.

Our heavenly Father, you have spoken such wonderful things. They are true, but we stumble in the dark. Overcome our hearing-impaired, sight-impaired, mind-impaired, heart-impaired natures. Our God, you let us glimpse what is true and right holy and perfect, what is worthy of adoration. You give us a glimpse of Christ himself. Paul blazed with light in Christ, and we want to blaze with light also. Make us know you better. Help us, our father, we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus, who brought us into life. Amen

How to use this study

A danger in reading a letter like Ephesians for many of you is that perhaps you have read one or all of Paul's letters and wonder what you can still learn. I encourage you to approach Ephesians with an open heart and mind. *"The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any double edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* Hebrews 4:12 Wow, if that is true, this book is not simply words, but it is power! Look deeper. Ask your heart deeper questions. As you go through this study, try to both get a bigger picture as well as see in-between the lines. Ephesians gives us the person and work of Jesus. What greater knowledge could there be and it is worth putting your whole life into studying.

Here are couple of practical study suggestions. If you are leading a group, ask the members to do the following:

- First, get a notebook or journal and prepare a section for your personal notes on the study.

- Second, read the letter through in one sitting. Take 2 hours on a Sunday afternoon and get your favorite coffee drink. Write down your own observations. What stands out to you? What do you learn about Jesus? What surprises you? What makes you ask questions? What makes you uncomfortable?
- Then, go through each section of this study. Read the material. Ask yourself the questions and write your answers down. Try and get the smaller details of each section but also keep in mind the comments and highlights on the big picture. Try and think big picture- smaller details- and bigger picture as you go through the book.
- Write down a broad outline as you go through. Try and see Paul's overall big picture themes. Pick out a couple verses to memorize that summarize what Paul is trying to tell us about Jesus and the Christian life.
- Finally, though Paul was a great man and said great things, Paul's life was about worshipping Jesus. Get to know the person of Jesus through Paul. Constantly ask what you are seeing about Jesus, His life, His character, His purpose and How Paul lives all those out.

Each section of this study includes three major parts. They start with a **"HOOK"**. The hook is meant to grab the participants' attention. It may be several questions, a statement of context, a scenario or perhaps a story.

Second, the **"LOOK"** section is the most significant portion of material and designed to engage with the passage of that study. I have spent hours and hours studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians using several commentaries and other studies. (Those resources are highlighted below). Use the work I have done in putting this together to help create more awareness of some of the themes and intentions to which Paul points. There are many questions written for each section. The Leader's Guide in particular (LG) offers more commentary, illustrations and creative ideas to help you as an individual or group process on a deeper level.

A cursory reading of Ephesians will leave many stones unturned and even potential errors in how we see Paul and his focus on Jesus. So look deeper, read thoughtfully and examine the hard teaching. The goal of the Look section is not just to process information, but move that information to heart action. In leading a group, try and make this study your own. But at the same time, it has been laid out intentionally to communicate the heart of what Paul tries to get across so bear in mind that the information is chosen with a goal in mind.

Often I will include a line or two at the end of the study for personal reflection. I will call this section **"Notebooks"**. In the notebook that they have purchased, give several minutes to respond to the questions. Then, as your group grows in vulnerability, ask them to share some of what they wrote.

Finally, each study finishes with a **"TOOK"** section. If we don't apply what we see in the Bible, studying the Bible is useless. Each section ends with the questions:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

I encourage you to leave time at the end for these questions. Have group members write their answers down. Help them remember their answers by saying them out loud. Ask each other to pray for the others that week along the lines of the answers to these questions.

*Unless noted, all commentary/context has been written by Miles O'Neill

Sources:

NIV Application Commentary, Klyne Snodgrass, 1996, Zondervan

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Peter T. O'Brien 1999 Eerdmans Publishing

An Introduction to the New Testament, D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, 2005 Zondervan

Encountering the New Testament, Walter Elwell, Robert Yarbrough, 2005 Baker Academic

Asking Christ-Centered Questions That Target the Heart

Rick Hove

In the process of leading a small group, you will employ a wide variety of questions. You will ask questions that help participants see important details in the text. You will ask questions that encourage participants to wrestle with the meaning of the text. You will ask questions that encourage participants to consider the significance of what they have read. You will ask questions that help participants discover the big idea. Ideally all of these questions should prepare people for the application that is the goal of your study. As you lead people respond to God through his Word, ask Christ-centered questions that target their hearts.

Why ask questions that target the heart?

First, life-change rarely occurs from simple knowledge. Think of all the things you know you should do. You know you should exercise. Does knowing this insure you will do it? You know you should control your eating. Does knowing this insure you will do it? You know you should guard your thoughts. Does knowing this insure you will do it? You know you should share your faith. Does knowing this insure you will do it? Life-change rarely occurs simply from “knowing” we should do something. Instead, life-change is more often like this: knowledge \Rightarrow “want to” \Rightarrow action. Someone can know, for example, that he should end a particular dating relationship but he will not do it until, at some level, he *wants to*. In other words, the *heart* is central to life-change. Thus, we need to ask questions that target the heart both to expose the ugly parts of our hearts and also to point our hearts to Christ so that we will *want to* change in response to who He is. If all the questions we ask in our study are merely “knowledge” or “how to” questions, we will not help people become who God wants them to be.

Second, one of the central motifs of the Scriptures is that God wants our hearts. Much of Christianity today fails to touch the heart. Furthermore, the root of sin lies at the heart level – cursing God, resisting God, ignoring God, making ourselves God, etc. When questions target the heart they expose sin and point the way to the glorious Savior and the awesome gospel.

Why ask questions that are “Christ-centered”?

From this point in salvation-history believers view the entire Bible through the lens of Christ. This isn’t to say that Christ is hiding in some obscure verse in Lamentations. Rather, it is saying that we read Lamentations, Psalms, Matthew and all Scripture from a post-Christ perspective, aware of who Christ is and what he has done. Christ, then, should be at the center of the Christian life. It only makes sense that our “sub-text” should be “Isn’t Christ great?” One of the major themes of the New Testament is our resistance to Christ. We may, for example, judge others but at the root of this sin is some sort of resistance to Christ. Making questions “Christ-centered” gets to both the root of the problem and the solution to the problem.

What do “Christ-Centered questions that target the heart” look like?

Here are some examples of Christ-centered questions that target the heart:

- Think of some of the darkest thoughts that have ever crossed your mind – thoughts which deeply haunt you. Christ knows these thoughts. How does this make you feel?
- What are you turning to for love in your life right now? If you turned to Christ for love,

how would it affect your relationships with others?

- Think of your relationship with Christ. Is Christ most often an “end” – the object of your enthrallment and interest? Or is Christ a “means” – someone who is pursued to get you something else? Why is this the case?
- Why is a slain Lamb who conquered so beautiful and worthy of adoration?
- What are things apart from God on which you build your identity? If your identity was in Christ how would you be different?
- What’s the most soul-gripping thing you’ve ever anticipated . . . something, some person, or some event that you LONGED for? Tell us about it. Do you LONG for the appearing of Christ with the same soul-gripping intensity that you long for other things? If not, why not?
- The greatest insult to Christ was the cross. It was the place of greatest shame. He was naked. He was hung as a criminal though he was innocent. He was suspended on a tree he made. He was taunted by jeers to save himself (like he couldn’t). Isaiah puts it so powerfully: *“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”* Is53:7 What is uniquely beautiful about Christ at this moment? Or, put another way, how is his beauty different at this moment than, say, when he raised Lazarus from the dead? What is beautiful about a God like this?

Although you might use “Christ-centered” questions at various points in your study, they will be most helpful as you move to “application.” As you help your group members respond to God through his Word, ask questions that target the heart (especially heart-resistance toward God) and point them to beauty of Christ and sufficiency of the gospel.

Inductive Bible Study

**Inductive Bible Study Method is a method of studying the Bible through a system of steps that help us grasp what a book's author intends for us to learn and apply. The focus of the method is in Observation technique as detailed below. I have personally found it very helpful to have some guidelines and ideas that help and motivate me to know where I am going and how to get the most out of what I am reading. The following will help explain the process, but ask a staff member for more details as needed.*

- Here are some quotes establishing an overall thought in studying the Bible:
 - "God is building a kingdom of redeemed people for Himself." *Unknown author*
 - "Establish thy word as that which produces reverence in thee." *Unknown author*
 - "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Hebrews 4:12

- ✓ What is the theme of these quotes? What is similar?

These quotes serve to communicate that the Bible is doing something! It is moving, living, powerful and purposeful. We should never approach the Bible as a benign object, rather as a living object used by God to move us and change us and build His kingdom on Earth.

Inductive Bible study method

- ✓ Which is the most difficult of the following: Observation, Interpretation, Application below?

Perhaps observation is really the most important, if we would do it well, it would leave far less to interpretation and even figuring out how to apply, the application will jump out at us as we observe well.

- ✓ Which is the one we do the most poorly?

Especially of late, there has been widespread interpretation which has been done very poorly and has become very dangerous... 'Jesus Seminar', Open Theism etc. Once again, if we would observe well, context, genre, intent, we would need to interpret far less and application would become compellingly apparent.

**We need to focus on Observation as the key to studying the scriptures. There are commentaries written by far smarter and more educated people to help us interpret well. Focus here on Observation.*

1. Observation

- **Context-** One of the central tasks of observing well is to be aware of the context in which a portion of the Bible was written; (or any piece of literature for that matter.) The context in which a letter or book was written helps us decipher the author's potential intentions. If we can determine the writer's intentions, it helps us see what he is actually saying and leads to interpreting well and also applying well. Thus there are many contextual issues to become familiar with as you observe a book of the Bible well: time, place, culture, and setting of the particular writing to name a few. On an even broader scale,

we must also look at where the writing takes place in light of the whole history of scripture. As you look at the particulars of a certain book, find out where that book fits in compared to what all of scripture has to say about God outworking of His divine plan. In light of that greater picture, this quote is worth reading:

**"Scripture- the Old and New Testaments- is the story of creation and new creation. Within that, there is the story of covenant and new covenant. When we read scripture as Christians, we read it precisely as people of the new covenant and of the new creation. We do not read it, in other words, as a flat, uniform list of regulations or doctrines. We read it as the narrative in which we ourselves are now called to take part. We read it to discover "the story so far" and also "how it's supposed to end." To put it another way, we live somewhere between the end of Acts and the closing scene of Revelation. If we want to understand scripture and to find it doing its proper work in and through us, we must learn to read and understand it in the light of that overall story....*

...It is the story of how God's kingdom was established on earth as in heaven in and through the work of Jesus, fulfilling Israel's great story, defeating the power of evil, and launching God's new world.

As we read the letters, we must remind ourselves that these are the documents designed to shape and direct the community of the new covenant, the people who were called to take forward the work of new creation.

As we read Revelation, we must not allow the wonderful heavenly vision in chapters 4 and 5 to lull us into imagining that this is the final scene in the story, as though the narrative were simply to concluded with the redeemed casting their crowns before the throne. This is a vision of present reality, seen in its heavenly dimension. We must read on to the end, to the final vision of Revelation 21 and 22, the chapters that give final meaning to all that has gone before and indeed to the entire canon.

Likewise, when we read the Old Testament, we must read it- as it manifestly asks to be read- as the long and winding story of how God chose a people to take forward his plan to rescue creation, not the story of how God had a shot at calling a people whom he would save from the world and how this was aborted, forcing him to try some things else (a caricature, I know, but one many will recognize). And this means that through the Old Testament must be read as part of "our story" as Christians, we must not imagine that we are still living within that moment in the story. The story itself points beyond itself, like a set of parallel lines meeting in the infinitely rich narrative of the gospels and the sudden outburst of new life in Acts and the letters.

-Surprised by Hope, NT Wright pp. 281-282

➤ We must study whole books to understand the message in its context

Illustration: reading a letter from a girl/boyfriend. What if you read the middle paragraph sentence that says 'I can't stand you, I don't want to be around you!' You call the friend and cuss them out and break up! They e-mail you, (you won't answer the phone of course...) and in words of tears ask, 'didn't you read the sentence before that?' It read, 'I love you! I can never imagine saying '.....'! Context!

Read it all in one sitting, don't just read the middle and use 'tweezer theology' (plucking some bit out ignoring the surrounding context) or you may end up getting the wrong message!

"Whenever we pick up the Bible and read it, even in a contemporary version like the Good News Bible, we are conscious of stepping back two millennia or (in the case of the OT) even more. We travel backwards in time, behind the microchip revolution and the industrial revolution, until we find

ourselves in an alien world which long ago ceased to exist. In consequence, the Bible feels odd, sounds archaic, looks obsolete and smells musty.” John Stott

**Therefore, a system of studying the Bible that looks for contextual clues to the author’s intentions is very important. The inductive Bible Study Method is just that.*

Study Process:

1. First time read through 1x in one sitting to gain a broad feel of the letter.

2. Read through 2nd time and begin recording the following in a journal: Who, What,

Where, When, Why

- Who: Paul (vs. 1)
- Where: From prison in Rome
- When: About A.D. 60
- What: How to live in Christ as the unified Church
- Why: There seemed to be a significant problem arising between the Jews and the Gentiles. Probably the Jews, those that had the ‘first right’ to Christ, treated the Gentiles as second class believers. (Where do you see evidence for this in the text?)

3. Read through 3rd time focusing on a search for THEMES.

Ask: what do you know about themes in Ephesians? Any verses or sections you know of?

Themes of Ephesians: Unity of Jews/Gentiles, Spirit Filled life, Grace, Responding to God’s grace through obedience through the Spirit.)

**A key to studying a Pauline letter is discovering its theme. Ephesians has a very specific theme and reason for which it was written. You must search for the theme and begin to grasp what Paul says in light of that backdrop. Read Eph 2:11-22 and you will see it. The theme has everything to do with Jew and Gentile unity in the church. The Jews thought they were special and had more of a right to God due to their special historical relationship as God’s people. The Gentiles were treated as second class Christians in the church. Paul is writing this letter to restore unity and right foundation to both sides...therefore everything can be seen more clearly in the letter through this lens and you can understand and apply the text more accurately to Paul’s and God’s intentions.*

Why is Eph 1:1-14 there? -To establish the common foundation amongst Jew and Gentile.

Why is 2:1-10 there? -To establish that they both come from slavery to death and are both now freed by grace! So on and so on. You might ask throughout the study...‘why is this here in light of the theme?’ If you are confused about a section....remember the theme to help interpret it.

- ✓ In light of the main themes, why might Paul have written chapter 1?
(Common foundation for Jews/Gentiles creates unity)
- ✓ How about Chapter 2:1-10?
(Common foundation of death to life by grace creates unity)
- ✓ How about Chapter 6?
(The armor of God context is really to do battle against disunity!)

4. Observe Repeated words, Transition words.

Ask: What are some transition words and why might they be important? ie. therefore, so, for etc.

-Paul is usually making a strong point with transition words...ie. Chp 4:1...'Therefore'....in light of Chp 1-3..... He goes on to give his ethics of living the Christian life, but all in the context of his first three chapters and the 'therefore' alerts us to the connection.

Ask: What are some repeated words that you have seen in Ephesians? In Christ, grace, life. Death; these all point to significant themes Paul is addressing and thinks are very important.

5. Observe Questions, Confusing statements and ideas.

Write down the questions and ideas that you want to pursue more at a later time.

6. Look for a Controlling verse

Select a verse that you could memorize that summarizes the book well. Perhaps Eph 2:8-10? This will help you remember the theme of the book and help you hold onto the main message and even help you live and apply. 5 years later you will be able to grasp some of what you have studied as you memorize the controlling verse.

7. Outline main sections

This and the following step are the meat of what you will spend time on in the Inductive Method. Outlining is key to gaining a grasp on the intention of the author of NT writings.

If you were to use roman numerals in an outline, how would you arrange Ephesians? Perhaps there are 4 main sections...5, 6...How would you outline it and what would you call each section? (this helps gain an overall view of the letter and helps put the details in each section in the larger context of what Paul is intending to write.)

9. Outline further detail

If you chose 4 main sections...now outline each section in further detail.

10. Diagram

Create a grammatical diagram for sections that you really want to dig deeper into. Write down each sentence in a hierarchical structure which shows which are the main phrases of emphases and which are the subordinate phrases. For example, Paul may pray a prayer lasting 5 verses. However, he may only pray for three main things. It is helpful to highlight those three main things and see how the other words serve to give more weight and foundation to those three. In this way it helps you see Paul's message clearly, hold onto the information more succinctly and apply more readily. I do this for each main section that in particular challenges or intrigues me. (For information on diagramming ask a staff member).

11. Do word studies

Choose a key word and dig deeper to gain a fuller understanding. 'In Christ' is mentioned 31 times in Ephesians...Paul may be telling us something!? Try and dig deeper to understand that phrase better. Use cross references to other letters, look it up in a commentary you own or on-line, look the words up in a dictionary...may not apply to this phrase... This will help you grasp the word and meditate on its significance.

12. Create a Chart

5 Years later, what will you remember from the letter? Creating a chart can give you a quick glance overview and refresh your memory years later. Begin with your outline of the main sections. Ephesians probably has two main sections...#1- from chapters 1-3 might be called 'Being'. #2- from chapters 4-6 might be called 'Doing'. Put those headings at the top of a chart. Section 1 may have 3 subheadings....#1- Chp 1:1-2:10, Identity in Christ, #2- Chp 2:10-22 Unity in Christ, Chp 3:1-21 Purpose in Christ. Place the titles you choose under the main heading. Then briefly outline each of the 3 headings you just chose under them. Do that for all the sections you come up with. Finally, under the whole chart, write out your controlling verse. You have now created a chart that you can quickly glance at and remember all the work you have done in the book. At this point you will really 'own' the book for yourself for years to come.

2. Interpretation

What is the Author's Big Idea (ABI) given the context in which the passage is found? All interpretation must be done in light of the ABI. Use commentaries to get a wide range of opinions about confusing questions. (Try BibleGateway.com for a sampling of commentaries for free.)

3. Application

- **View of God:** What have I learned about one of the persons or all of the Trinity? What do I need to believe about God? What am I not believing about God? What are the ramifications in my life of not thinking rightly about God?
- **Action:** What should I do according to the Bible? Is there a command to obey?
- **Character:** What should I be? What must I change if I am to be holy? How can I become more like Christ? Is there a lesson to learn? Is there a sin to confess?
- **Goals:** To what causes should I devote my life energy? What can I do to change the world so it conforms to God's plans?
- **Discernment:** How can we distinguish truth from error? How can I gain discernment? How can I gain wisdom from God and the church?
- **Meditation:** Ask God to reveal where He wants you to apply the passage you are studying. Memorize a section to remember and allow it to permeate your heart and mind.

***Assignment:**

- Read article: 'The Music of the Gospel' by Keith Johnson
- Read Ephesians in one sitting all the way through

Suggested Reading: How to Read the Bible for all its Worth, Fee/Stuart; God's Big Picture, Vaughan Roberts

MUSIC OF THE GOSPEL

Christ-Centered Bible Study

by Keith E. Johnson, Ph.D.

Imagine yourself in a large house in which those who are deaf and those who can hear are living together.¹ In

one of the rooms, you see a guy sitting in a chair and listening to music on his iPod. Rhythmically, he's tapping his foot, drumming his thighs, jutting his chin out, swaying to the beat, and pursing his lips like Mick Jagger or someone. His entire body moves in response to what his ears are hearing. It's obvious that he's enjoying himself and listening to a pretty good song.

A few minutes later, one of the deaf persons enters the room. Seeing the guy listening to the music and impersonating Mick Jagger, he thinks, "That looks like fun. I think I'll try that. So he sits down next to him and begins to imitate him. Awkwardly at first, he tries drumming his thighs, jutting his chin out, and swaying to the music just like the guy with the iPod. With a little practice, he begins to catch onto it. By watching and trying, he begins to mirror the other guy's actions pretty closely. But although he eventually gets better at keeping time, he concludes that it's not as much fun or as easy as it initially seemed (especially the chin jut—very difficult to do when you're not actually hearing the music).

After a while, a third person enters the room and watches this scene. What does he see? Two people apparently doing the same thing, apparently listening to the same thing. Is there a difference? Absolutely. The first guy hears the music and his actions are a natural response to the music's rhythm and

melody. The second guy is merely imitating the outward actions. Being deaf, he's not listening to anything.

There's an important spiritual parallel here. The dance (outward actions) represents the Christian life, while the music represents the grace of the gospel. Though we have come to know Christ through grace, we are often like the deaf man in the story who tries to perform the dance without hearing the music. Our spiritual life is reduced to a series of dance steps—external behaviors and activities—devoid of God's animating and transforming power. God's desire is not to get us to do the dance but to get us to hear the music of the gospel, with the dance (godly actions, character, and activities) flowing naturally from it.

The term gospel literally means "good news." In the New Testament, the gospel encompasses not only the forgiveness of sins but also everything else that God has done for us in Christ (adoption, reconciliation, justification, and so forth). What follows in this article is a brief reflection on how to tune in to the music of the gospel, listening for its rhythm as you read the Scriptures.

Understanding the Redemptive

Focus of Scripture

We all have a propensity to perform—to act in ways we are expected to act in order to receive the affirmation we crave. We also, perhaps through years of schooling, have

come to believe that what matters most is not the process of growth or learning but what we get for grades, how well we perform on SATs, what we produce. Whatever the baggage, whatever its origins, it's there. And it can lead us to look to the Bible and see nothing more than a collection of ethical directives instructing us in how to live. But to read Scripture in this way is to reduce it to dance steps—the dos and don'ts of the Christian life—and to miss the melody entirely. To hear the music of the gospel, we need to understand how God intends his Word to function in our lives.

The writer of Hebrews gives us a push in the right direction. In chapter 4 he urges his readers not to harden their hearts and miss the rest that God has provided in Christ (Hebrews 4:1-11). He closes with the following statement: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (verses 12-13, ESV).

Notice how the writer describes the role of Scripture in our lives, likening it to the thinnest sword imaginable—a sword that penetrates to the deepest recesses of our soul. As a result, we are "naked and exposed" before God. What the writer wants us to see is that Scripture, first, is designed to expose the sinful condition of our heart, not simply to prescribe a new behavior.

Several years ago I had a stressful week prior to a major conference I was leading. A number of times I found myself asking my wife's forgiveness for being rude to her. In the back of my mind, however, I really believed that the problem lay in my circumstances. If my life weren't so stressful, I told myself, I wouldn't be treating the people around me so poorly. The following Sunday, our pastor spoke from Deuteronomy 8 about how God tests our hearts to reveal what's in them. It was as if God's spirit said to me, "Your problem is not these circumstances. These circumstances have merely revealed what was in your heart." This is precisely what Scripture is intended to do—reveal our brokenness that requires the work and person of Christ.

I realize that what I have said so far about Scripture is not particularly upbeat and something you'd want to dance to (nothing like hearing how wrecked and lousy some we are to get those toes tapping!). But the choreography of grace cannot be directly accessed; you must first waltz through

brokenness and repentance. Those who seek to move directly to the upbeat and eliminate the downbeat destroy the tune entirely.

Graciously, Scripture does not leave us on the downbeat; naked, exposed in our sin. Notice how the writer of Hebrews continues: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16).

The writer of Hebrews does not point us toward a program of behavior modification but instead to a person. The remedy for our brokenness is not in corrective dance steps but in Christ.

Most New Testament scholars believe that the original readers of the book of Hebrews were Jewish Christians (thus the name of the book). A number of them had experienced persecution because of their faith and some were tempted to walk away from Christ. In this context the writer paints a portrait of Christ as one who fundamentally understands the readers' problems because, in his human nature, he experienced the same temptations they were experiencing. Through this and other portraits of Christ, the writer of Hebrews is attempting to woo the hearts of his readers to the love and beauty of Christ.

This highlights a second role of Scripture—pointing our hearts to our Savior. We tend to limit this dimension of Scripture to those who are outside the Christian faith. That is, we assume that the primary role of Scripture for the unbeliever is pointing his or her heart toward Christ. We often fail to recognize that our hearts constantly need to be pointed to Christ as well.

Here's what I mean. If you were to explain the gospel to a non-Christian—say, a non-Christian who swears like a dock worker—you would want him to acknowledge his sin (including profanity) and need for forgiveness, right? And, if he acknowledged that, you would then point him to Christ for forgiveness, acceptance, and grace. But what happens when we, as believers, have a swearing problem? We tell each other to stop swearing. Or we tell ourselves to stop swearing. And when we come to the Scriptures, what we read repeatedly every line is "Stop swearing! Christians don't act that way!"

What happened to the gospel for us? How did our dynamic walk with Christ mutate into Christian Behavior 101?

Or we might point out to a non-Christian, as we are sharing the gospel with her, that she has falsely turned to things other than God (things like success, drugs, sex, approval, whatever) to meet her needs and make her life work. But as believers, aren't we still tempted to make our lives work apart from Christ? Don't we often seek life apart from him in control, influence, approval, performance, or any number of other alternatives. We, too, need to constantly be pointed back to Christ, in whom alone life can be found. We continue to need to hear the music of the gospel and never outgrow it.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture does two things: (1) it exposes our brokenness and (2) it points us to our Savior. That's the gospel, and we want to look at each of these in more detail.

Portraits of Our Brokenness

The primary question on most of our minds as we read and apply Scripture is "What does this passage teach about what I am supposed to do?" Yet if we read the Bible merely looking for dance steps, we'll fail to hear the music of the gospel. To hear the music of the gospel, we must first ask a different question: "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?"

Let's look briefly at three examples.

First, imagine you are reading the book of James. You come across the following: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your

life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" (James 4:13-16).

In this passage James appears to criticize all attempts to plan for the future. If we start by asking, "What should I do?" then we may attempt to identify situations in which planning for the future is wrong. ("What do you mean I need to hand in my assignment on Tuesday? Blasphemer!") However, by doing this, we may entirely miss James's point. In fact, we would. If, however, we ask the question "What does this reveal about my brokenness that requires Christ's work in my life?" then we are in a better position to discern James's true purpose.

Notice the reference to "boast" and "boasting" in verse 16; James is speaking to a prideful spirit of independence that says, "I'm the master of my fate, the controller of my destiny. I'm the man." James invites me to come to the Lord acknowledging my propensity to try to control my future and live independently from him. I must repent of my lack of faith in his goodness. Thus the real dance step is not about planning at all. What I hear Christ saying is "Entrust your future to me," not merely "Stop making boastful claims about your future, you braggart." This kind of trust requires a renovation of my soul.

Next, imagine you're reading through the Gospel of Mark. In chapter 10 you read about an incident that takes place as Jesus and his disciples are making their final journey to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. Immediately after Jesus tells his disciples that he will be spit upon, flogged, and murdered in Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-34), James and John approach Jesus

with a special request: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (verse 37).

James and John are requesting special places of honor in his kingdom. They see their association with Jesus as a means to future status, power, and influence. As a result, they are blind to Jesus' true purpose.

At this point you could be thinking, "How can they have been so blind and power hungry? But if we ask the question 'What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?' we just may see ourselves in the actions of Jesus' disciples. Aren't we like James and John?"

A number of years ago, I moved from Chicago to Indianapolis to take a ministry position. After joining my new team, I began to struggle with the fact that I didn't have a particular position of influence on this team.

Subconsciously, I really believed that if I had a position of greater influence, I would experience a greater sense of worth and satisfaction. Ironically, my "Christian service" was a means to that end. I was searching for life apart from Christ in status and influence. Turns out, I'm exactly like James and John.

Finally, imagine you are reading through the book of Jeremiah and come across these words:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this: be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:12-13)



Idols offer a counterfeit to aspects of God's identity and character. Idols represent the broken cisterns we trade for fountains of living water

The people of Israel were dependent on rainfall for their survival. They frequently collected rainwater underground in cisterns hewn of rock. To the big, beery, agrarian farmer who lived in this drought-filled land, this imagery of broken cisterns would have spoken volumes. The prophet claims that God's people had exchanged a flowing fountain for broken cisterns that were incapable of holding life-giving water.

As we reflect on this passage, we want to ask ourselves the question, "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?" Framed this way, we immediately recognize that the passage aptly describes a problem endemic to our lives. When we seek life in Internet pornography, for example, we trade a fountain for broken cisterns. Or when we seek life in control, we trade a fountain for broken cisterns. Or when we seek life in romance, we trade a fountain for broken cisterns. Or when we seek life in performance . . . You get the idea.

One of the broken cisterns in my life is a craving for the approval of others. I remember a situation during my graduate program in which the academic dean of the school where I was studying concluded that I had acted disrespectfully toward one of the school's administrators. I remember the fear I felt as I anticipated meeting with the dean. I couldn't read or concentrate on my Bible that morning; it was like trying to read how to turn my seat cushion into a flotation device while my plane plummeted toward earth. It became clear to me what was going on in my heart when the following thought crashed into my mind: I have to have his approval. It doesn't matter what it takes—I have to have his approval. The meeting went well (I didn't curl up in a fetal position or anything), and the misunderstanding was resolved. But the events brought to my painful awareness how I look for life more in the approval of people than in the approval of God through Christ.

When we look for life apart from Christ in relationships, success, control, influence, sexual fantasy, and so on, we trade a flowing fountain for broken cisterns that cannot hold water. What are the broken cisterns in your life? How are you tempted to make life work apart from Christ?

That's where the Jeremiah passage wants to take us. And asking the question, "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?" opens the door to go there.

Uncovering the Sin beneath the Sin

One evening in late December, I was driving home from my office in Indianapolis. In order to get to my apartment, I had to drive past a large mall. Around Christmas, the traffic near this mall is unbearable. This particular evening it took thirty minutes to go less than a mile. As the minutes ticked away, I became increasingly agitated. (I like the word *agitated* better than *enraged*, *irate*, *fuming*, *irked*, or *hired*. . . all of which I was, of course). But then, in a moment of boiling anger, I smashed the steering wheel as hard as I could with my fist. I eventually made it home, but I arrived with a sore fist and a guilty conscience.

I let's imagine that the following morning I'm reading Ephesians, determined to consider what Scripture has to say regarding my brokenness. Reading Paul's injunctions in chapter 4 to put away anger, I might conclude that Scripture is revealing to me that I have a problem with anger. (Of course, this was already clear to me, and to many around me, without my even opening my Bible). But I cannot stop here as if anger were the ultimate source of my sin. It's not. I need to dig deeper to get at what's causing the anger. I need to ask, "What is the sin beneath the sin of anger?"

Although my anger arises in a variety of circumstances, I've noticed an important thread running through my episodic bouts of rage . . . I mean, agitation. My anger is often triggered by delays, unplanned interruptions, schedule changes, traffic jams, malfunctioning computers, people not following systems I create or doing what I want them to do. The root of much of my anger, in other words, is a longing to control my world. When I feel out of control—in a traffic jam, for example—I get angry because someone's messing with my world. While control may not be the only source of my anger, it's a significant one.

We tend to focus on the surface sins (the fruit) without considering what's beneath the surface (the root). To hear the music of the gospel, we must go deeper, considering both the fruit and the root of our sin.

As you prayerfully consider the root of specific sins in your life, the biblical category of idolatry can be particularly helpful. Idolatry is one of the major themes in the Bible, as evidenced by the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). When we think of idolatry, particularly in the Bible, we picture it in terms of bowing down to a carved statue of some kind (see Ezekiel 14:1-8). But just because we haven't prostrated ourselves before a statue of Zeus or the Statue of Liberty doesn't mean we're innocent of idolatry. An idol can be anything we believe we need, apart from Christ, to fulfill us. By this definition, we all dabble more than a little in idolatry.

Because we've turned away from God, we experience alienation, inadequacy, and deficiency. Idolatry takes place any time the functional trust of our heart shifts to someone or something other than Christ. I like how one writer puts it: "We serve, love, desire, trust, fear, and worship other things apart from God to give us love, joy, peace, freedom, status, identity, control, happiness, security, fulfillment, health, pleasure, significance, acceptance, and respect. Sometimes our idols are obviously wrong. However, the things we desire are often good in themselves, such as having well-behaved children. . . . Even good things become idols when they start to rule our lives."²

Idols offer a counterfeit to aspects of God's identity and character. Idols represent the broken cisterns we trade for fountains of living water (Jeremiah 2:13). As a result, we shouldn't think about idolatry as one sin among others but rather as a root sin that expresses itself in a variety of ways.

Scripture helps me to see that my problem is much deeper than occasional outbursts of anger. Control represents an idol in my life—an idol

that I believe will give me security and peace. Although I would never explicitly say this, in my heart I believe there is more life to be found in having my puny little world in control than there is to be found in Christ. Ugly, isn't it? But that's the truth of the gospel in my life. That's the Word digging down, judging "the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12), and distinguishing between deficient behavior (anger) and a deficient heart (idolatry).

We locate idols in our lives by prayerfully examining our fears, trusts, and desires and considering what these reveal about where we believe real life can be found.³

Portraits of a Beautiful Savior

Because Scripture has a redemptive purpose, it does not leave us to morosely sing along to the dirge of sin but instead leads us on to the melody of the gospel (that is, all that God is for us in Christ). And so there is a second question we need to ask as we seek to respond to God through his Word. After we have asked, "What does this reveal about my brokenness that requires the work of Christ?" we next must ask, "How does this passage point me to Christ?"

In a debate with Jewish leaders over his authority and identity, Jesus offered the following indictment: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). Jesus was not talking with theological liberals but rather as a root sin that expresses itself in a variety of ways. . . . Even good things become idols when they start to rule our lives."²

that Scripture's role in redemption lies in detailing for us the commands and demands of God, and they had misused how Scripture points us to the Christ.

Again, note the difference in the following examples when we come to the text not simply looking for dance steps but asking, "How does this passage point me to Christ?"

Matthew 4 records the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. If we read this passage simply asking, "What does this passage exhort me to do?" we will not hear the music of the gospel. We may instead reduce the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness to a lesson about how to avoid temptation. ("So when Satan asks if you would like to rule all the kingdoms of the world, remember to say no, like Jesus did.") While this story does have implications for how we consider how it points us to Christ.

Matthew is drawing a parallel between the experience of the people of Israel and that of Jesus. Both were led





into the wilderness. Both were tested. But what happened when Israel was led into the wilderness? Israel failed. And what happened when Jesus was led into the wilderness? He remained faithful.

In what sense does this passage offer good news? Like Israel, we also are tempted. And like Israel, we also fail. We fail all the time, as a matter of fact. And so we need someone who can live a perfect life on our behalf. The great news of the gospel is that Jesus has done that. In this passage, therefore, Jesus is not primarily our example, showing us how to face temptation. He is our hero, who lived in perfect obedience and who credits us with his righteousness.

In a sermon on this passage, Jason Gibson sums this point up well:

If Jesus had failed in the desert we could not have been put right with God, for there would have been

no perfect sacrifice to take away sin forever, and no perfect life to be credited to our account. In the Gospel God treats Jesus as if He had failed and treats us as if we had never failed. In the Gospel Jesus is punished as if He had disobeyed God, and we are declared to be perfect as if we had never disobeyed God! Matthew's Gospel is about just that—the Gospel! Which is about Jesus, God's final obedient Son. The wait for an obedient son is over. He has arrived. Jesus is the new and better Adam, the true Israel who has defeated the devil and won back for rebels the paradise lost. And this is the Gospel that is available to all of us who admit our weakness and inability to overcome Satan, and trust in what Jesus has done for us on our behalf.³

By asking how this passage points us to Christ, we begin to hear music we might otherwise have missed.

Consider again the following passage in Hebrews 4: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16).

We live in a world marked by suffering. Parents married twenty years file for divorce. A friend's life is tragically ended by an auto accident. A parent contracts a debilitating illness. As believers, we sometimes find ourselves despairing in response to these circumstances. It's easy to feel as if no one understands or as if other believers don't have to deal with what we're dealing with. But notice how the writer of Hebrews points our hearts to Christ as one who truly understands.

The writer calls us to reflect upon Jesus' final hours: he was betrayed by a friend, abandoned by his disciples, endured unimaginable physical and emotional abuse, and experienced an excruciating death. He understands abandonment, loneliness, rejection, shame, and sorrow because he experienced these things himself. He can identify with the entire range of our painful experiences. Not only can we find understanding in Christ, but also, when we draw near to him, we find mercy and grace to help us in our need. And so, as we ask the question "How does this passage point me to Christ and the gospel?" we see that the good news is that we have a Savior who understands suffering and pain because he has experienced them. He is not distant from us nor has he abandoned us in our pain, but he is right there with us in the midst of it.

Some years ago I went through a difficult time emotionally. Whatever the source, I was consistently drained and could never seem to get to sleep at night. Of course, the less you sleep, the weirder you get. And the weirder you get, the more you find yourself staring at the ceiling at night wondering what in the world's wrong with you. I thought I'd never feel normal again. I would try to describe to my friends what I was feeling, and yet, as much as they cared, it was clear they really didn't understand what was going on inside me. I distinctly remember the hope this passage gave me as I came to God in prayer, knowing that Christ understood what I

By asking how this passage points us to Christ, we begin to hear music we might otherwise have missed.

was experiencing and would provide the grace I needed to get through it.

Finally, we will explore an unlikely place to encounter the music of the gospel: the book of Hosea. (Contrary to popular opinion, the Old Testament prophets really dug this music.) Here is a prophetic message delivered by Hosea to the northern kingdom shortly before it was destroyed by the Assyrian army in 722 b.c. Although there would be no deliverance for the northern kingdom from the Assyrians (Hosea 13:6), Hosea's final message offers hope to a future generation:

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take with you words
and return to the Lord;
say to him,
"Take away all iniquity;
accept what is good,
and we will pay with bulls
the vows of our lips.
Assyria shall not save us;
we will not ride on horses,
and we will say no more, 'Our God!'
to the work of our hands.
In you the orphan finds mercy;"

I will heal their apostasy;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them.
I will be like the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom like the lily;
he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon;
his shoots shall spread out;
his beauty shall be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow;
they shall flourish like the grain;
they shall blossom like the vine;

their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.
O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?

It is I who answer and look after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit.
(Hosea 14:1-8)

In this chapter we see a beautiful picture of the gospel. Although we encounter no explicit reference to Jesus, this chapter indirectly points us to the good news that we find in Christ. God's people are invited to "return" to him (verse 1). All they can bring are "words" of repentance and faith (verses 2-3). In response, God promises to heal them (verse 4), love them freely (verse 4), and generously provide for their needs (verses 5-8). Notice the imagery God uses to describe what he will do for them. God will be like "dew" so that they will blossom like flowering lilies, beautiful olive trees, flourishing grain, and blossoming vines. Although today this imagery is lost on all but poetry and lit majors, it would have been music to the original listeners of this message.

To understand the significance of God's promise in this passage, it helps to understand the broader message of Hosea. God's people had abandoned him for the foreign and false god Baal. Things were so bad that God instructed the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute as a kind of living parable of the nation's spiritual adultery (Hosea 1-3).

We may wonder what the Israelites found attractive about Baal. That's simple: Baal was a fertility God. By participating in Baal worship, the people hoped to bring greater fruitfulness to their crops and increase their gross national product. (And with Baal being a fertility god, sex would have been a part of his worship—

definitely an added attraction.) What's striking about the message is that God describes the future blessing of his people in the very terms in which they had abandoned him—that is, fruitfulness. Notice the tender invitation in 14:8:

O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?

It is I who answer and look after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit.

The point of the communication: God invites his people to find what they are searching for in him.

If one were to summarize the theological message of Hosea 14, it would be something like this: God invites us—those in need of mercy—to return to him with a broken and contrite heart, seeking his forgiveness and trusting in him alone. In response, he promises to be our all-sufficient source. A clearer picture of the gospel would be hard to find. In the gospel, Christ offers himself to us not merely as a sacrifice for sin but as the all-satisfying source for which our hearts most deeply long.³

You may be thinking, I would never have seen these things in Hosea. That's okay for now. In order to see how Scripture exposes our brokenness and points us to Christ, we need to continue to grow as readers of Scripture.⁴ A good commentary on Hosea (or any other biblical book you're studying) can provide pertinent information you may be lacking.

Clarifying a Potential Misunderstanding

My claim that Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, exposes our brokenness and points us to Christ and the gospel may raise a nagging question:

Am I suggesting that every passage of the Bible somehow proclaims Jesus? Or in other words, are we talking about looking for Jesus in places where he cannot be found?

A young boy was once asked in Sunday school, "What is small, brown, furry, and has a tail?"

The child thought for a minute and said, "It sounds like a squirrel, but I'll say Jesus!"

This is *not* what we're talking about. We are not looking to find Jesus in every passage of Scripture. Nor are we suggesting that anyone ignore the original meaning of the passage. What we are talking about is reading all of Scripture as a witness to Jesus (see Luke 24:25-27; John 5:39). All the individual stories in the Bible tell a larger story that centers on the person and work of Christ.⁵

We do not attempt to *find* Christ in every text but rather to discover how every text relates to Christ and his redemptive work.⁶ This involves both carefully studying the passage in its original context and relating it to the larger story of Scripture.

In his book *The Ancient Lane Song*, Charles Drew notes that Scripture points us to Christ in a variety of ways.⁷

- The Law (especially portions of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) anticipates Christ by exposing our hearts and persuading us of our need for a Savior.
- At a broader level, the failures of specific Old Testament characters (for example, the repeated failures of God's people to trust him and follow his law) also point indirectly to our need for a Savior.
- The promises scattered throughout the Old Testament (especially prophetic books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) anticipate Christ by kindling a longing at several levels that only Jesus can ultimately fulfill. For example, God's repeated promise to dwell with his people (Leviticus 26:11-12; Ezekiel 37:26-28) comes most clearly to fruition in the incarnation of God's Son ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John 1:14) and the future kingdom of Christ (Revelation 21:3).
- Wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and so on) compels us to look to Christ for meaning and for the ability to live wisely (see Colossians 2:3).
- The psalmists and prophets sometimes spoke with

the voice of Christ, anticipating his suffering (the Cross) and exaltation (the Resurrection).

- Particular Old Testament offices (prophet, priest, and king) foreshadow Christ's redemptive work. They invite us to look for a prophet who is greater than Moses, a priest who is greater than Aaron, and a king who is greater than David.

- Certain Old Testament rituals, such as the Passover (Exodus 12), foreshadow God's redemption of his people through the Cross.

In the New Testament we encounter explicit proclamation of Jesus:

- The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) introduce us to Jesus Christ and his ministry on earth, culminating in his death, burial, and resurrection.
- The Epistles (Romans, Galatians, and so forth) offer sustained theological reflection on the significance of the person and work of Christ for the church.

- Revelation gives us a window into the future glory of Christ as he brings in his heavenly kingdom.

And so the way Scripture points us to Christ in Genesis differs significantly from the way Scripture points us to Christ in the Gospel of John. What I am briefly outlining in this essay is a vision for a Christ-centered (or gospel-centered) approach to reading Scripture.¹⁰

Hearing the Music: An Example from Ephesians

We've been looking at how, in order to hear the music of the gospel, we need to consider *how a passage exposes our brokenness* and *how it points to Christ*. Having looked at these elements separately, let's put them together by considering one final example from Ephesians in some detail.

Imagine you are studying Ephesians 4:25-5:2.

Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good



You can't take that. The music of the gospel lowers the decibel level of the criticism and mutes the inner voices of defensiveness.

for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

You might begin by reflecting on the context of this passage. It comes in the second half of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He has just finished describing God's provision for growth in and through the church; God has given the believers spiritual gifts in order to build up the church for the glory of Christ. In 4:1 Paul exhorts his readers to live in a manner worthy of their calling. In 4:17 we find this same exhortation stated negatively: "Do not live as the Gentiles live. In 4:25—5:2 Paul begins to describe how their lives will look different as they live out their new identity.

You, being a biblical savant, were able to glean all this in minutes, allowing you leisurely time to make some observations about the passage. You might note that it is full of commands. In addition, there are numerous contrasts (falsehood versus truth, stealing versus sharing, corrupt talk versus words of encouragement, and so on). These contrasts seem to play a central role in the passage. Along the way, you might explore the meaning of key terms in this passage using a Bible dictionary. You might also consult a commentary. A study Bible is essentially a commentary, only not as exhaustive. A commentary is the next step up in study notes. *The NIV Application Commentary* is a good place to start when you're ready for the upgrade.

But the real difference comes as we think about how to apply this passage to our lives. If we come to the Bible seeking

from it a catalog of commendable Christian behaviors, we'll see only the dance steps. And this passage most certainly contains dance steps—both steps to avoid (lying, anger, stealing, and so on) and steps to follow (speaking truth, sharing, building up others through our speech). It's a biblical Riverdance. In a small-group Bible study, we might discuss in detail what some of these steps look like. For example, we might identify instances of corrupt speech in our lives and talk about what it would look like to encourage one another. We might conclude the study by reminding the group to apply these things to their lives and to consider how they might speak and treat each other differently. As they say, "It's all good," but the problem with this approach is that it bypasses the music that motivates the dance.

A Christ-centered approach to applying this passage differs not because it ignores the dance steps but rather because it searches for the music. At this point we want to ask the first question I introduced in this article: "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?" On one level, the answer might seem obvious. We can find a whole list of sinful behaviors in this passage. However, to see how this describes our brokenness, we're going to have to dig deeper.

To do so, it may be helpful to ask, "What do all the sinful behaviors listed in 4:25—5:2 have in common?" In discerning the behaviors, it seems that Paul was attempting to address the various forms of self-centeredness that destroy relationships. Moreover, it seems Paul was not merely interested in restraining outward expressions of sinful behavior but was actually looking for inward transformation. Forgiveness, after all, is a change of heart, not something on a to-do list. In Ephesians 5:2 our self-centeredness seems all the more . . . well, self-centered when contrasted with Christ's self-sacrifice. In short, what we discover is that our problem is deeper than the need for moral reformation. What we need is a savior.

In this passage we encounter not only portraits of our brokenness but also portraits of God's redemptive work. Paul reminds us of the forgiveness we've experienced in Christ at the cost of his life. He is not merely giving us an example to follow but he is also pointing us to the music that motivates the dance. We are to forgive as Christ forgave us (4:32). We are to love as God loved us (5:1-2). But how do we do this? By richly experiencing God's love and forgiveness.



Paul ends the first half of Ephesians by praying that in the deepest recesses of our being we would have power from the Holy Spirit to know how wide, how high, how deep, and how long is the love of God in Christ and that we would be filled with the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-21). In essence, Paul is praying that God's Spirit would enable us to hear the music of the gospel. It is only as we hear this music that we can forgive as we have been forgiven and love as God loves us.

An example may make this a little more concrete. Imagine two people. They are both Christians and they are both in situations where they are being criticized.

One of them is able to listen and sort through the criticism, admitting to what is true and patiently responding to what she feels to be unfair. By her response, you can tell that the criticism she's receiving is like a prick in the finger. And that's because there's a security flowing out of a deep experience of God's love and grace. You can't fake that. The music of the

gospel lowers the decibel level of the criticism and mutes the inner voices of defensiveness. The other Christian faces the same kind of criticism yet he's consumed with anger. He hates criticism and so he either shifts the blame to anything or anyone other than himself or he spirals into complete and utter self-loathing. He's filled to the brim with the rage and anger that Ephesians 4 tells us to get rid of. It's clear that what he's experiencing is not a prick in the finger but more a meat cleaver in the heart. Why? Because he is not believing the truth of the gospel. He is not experiencing the riches of God's love, forgiveness, and acceptance through Jesus Christ, and his reaction makes this abundantly clear.

The Christ-centered point of Ephesians 4 is clear: if you know how richly you are loved by Christ, then criticism is more like a prick in the finger than a knife wound to the heart. (With that, I'll try to refrain from using any more graphically violent metaphors.)

Gospel-Centered Living

If we were to ask a group of Christians, “What was your greatest need prior to your conversion?” I imagine they would all answer, “The gospel.”¹¹ However, if we were to ask that same group, “What is your greatest need following your conversion?” we would elicit a wide variety of answers.

I am suggesting that the answer remains unchanged following our conversion. We still need the gospel. We still need to humbly lay bare the roots of our sin. We must continue to acknowledge our inadequacy and impotence to live righteously before God. And we must continue to trust wholly in the sufficiency of Christ—his forgiveness, empowerment, and promises.

This is the process we went through when we came to faith, and it is the way we continue to live out our faith. “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Colossians 2:6). As Tim Keller points out, “The gospel is not just the ‘A-B-C,’ but the ‘A-to-Z,’ of the Christian life. The gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom, but is the way to address every problem and is the way to grow at every step.”¹²

That the gospel remains central to our lives as believers has vast implications for how we live and minister to others. As John Piper explains,

When believers know and love and live on the merit of the gospel, we will be so gospel-filled and gospel-shaped and gospel-dependent and gospel-driven and gospel-hopping and gospel-joyful that no one will need to tell us why we need to share the gospel or how to share the gospel. We will be so thankful and so desperately, day-by-day dependent on the gospel for our own hope of eternal life, and our own sanity, and our own stability, and our own marriages or singleness, that it will be impossible not to know that people need the gospel and why they need it and how it relates to their biggest needs—because we know we need it, and why we need it, and how it meets our biggest needs day by day.¹³

The gospel should shape the way we deal with failure, the way we grow, the way we react to disappointment, and so forth. Take, for example, my anger problem. Until what Christ offers in the gospel becomes more satisfying to me than the false sense of life I get from control, anger will dominate my life. The gospel gives me the ability to receive criticism, because my acceptance before God does not depend on how I perform. The gospel frees me from the need to be “right,” because Christ has paid for my failure. The gospel frees me truly to love

others, because my worth is not dependent on their approval. The gospel frees me to take risks, because my worth does not depend upon my successes but on the success of Christ.

The gospel should shape not only the way we read and apply the Bible in our own life but also the way we teach it to others. For example, as small-group leaders, our goal is not merely to teach people dance steps but to turn up the music of the gospel. The key to leading an effective small group is asking the right questions, especially questions that target the heart.

Of the wide variety of questions you might ask in a small group, there are two kinds of questions specifically designed to turn up the music.

First, we need to ask questions that surface the brokenness in others’ lives that requires the gospel. We want people to see how their wrong behaviors are rooted in heart resistance to Christ. This is not always easy to do. Sometimes I’ve written questions that I’ve never asked because I was afraid of what people in my small group might think of me.

Second, we need to ask questions that point our group members to the beauty and sufficiency of Christ. When people hear the music, you’ll be able to see it in their eyes. A small group of six couples I lead spent several months studying the book of Hosea together. I distinctly remember several conversations in which there were tears in group members’ eyes as the gospel came to life for them in Hosea.

We were created to know God—our hearts were made to respond to the music of the gospel. There is nothing more beautiful than a life gracefully responding to the rhythm of the gospel, and there is nothing as painful to watch as someone just imitating dance steps. As we allow Scripture to expose our brokenness and point us to our Savior, it functions as it was intended: as a speaker amplifying the music of the gospel. And as we communicate the Scripture in a Christ-centered way, others will begin to hear the music as well.

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Resources

Books:

- Bright, Bill. *Transferable Concepts* (www.transferableconcepts.org). Transferable concept 2, “How You Can Experience God’s Love and Forgiveness.”
- Drew, Charles D. *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000.
- Maloney, C. J. *Living the Cross-Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2006.
- Piper, John. *Seeing and Knowing Jesus Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.
- Storms, Sam. *Pleasures Everywhere: The Life-Changing Power of Enjoying God*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2000.
- Williams, Neil H. *Gospel Transformation*, 2d ed. Jenkintown, PA: World Harvest Mission, 2006. Available through World Harvest Mission (www.whm.org).

Web:

- www.dancemusicanddance.com
- www.campuscrusadeforchrist.org

Notes

- This illustration was developed by Larry Kirk, pastor of Christ Community Church in Daytona Beach, Florida.
- Neil H. Williams, *Gospel Transformation*, 2d ed. (Jenkintown, PA: World Harvest Mission, 2006), 59.
- For help with discerning areas of idolatry, see Williams, *Gospel Transformation*, 57–65.
- Jason Gibson, “Finally . . . An Obedient Son!” Beginning with Moses, www.beginningwithmoses.org/briefings/mathewskw1011.htm.
- For more on this theme in Scripture, see John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
- To grow in our ability to hear the music of the gospel, we must grow in our ability to understand the Scriptures. A helpful starting point is Daniel M. Dorani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000).
- For a helpful overview of the storyline of the Bible, see Vaughn Roberts, *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
- See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 279.
- Charles D. Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament*

(Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000).

¹⁰ For a helpful discussion of the rich variety of ways Scripture points us to Christ, see Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 269–328.

¹¹ “The gospel is the basic message that: God made [Christ], who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (1 Corinthians 5:21). [The gospel] tells us that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than you ever dared to hope.” Tim Keller, *Following Christ Handbook*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

¹² Keller, *Following Christ Handbook*.

¹³ John Piper, “How Does the Gospel Save Believers? Part Two,” Desiring God, <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/98/081698.html>.



Part I: Being– Ephesians 1:1–3:23

Lesson 1: Foundation in Christ

Ephesians 1:1-10

HOOK:

A firm foundation is necessary for any structure. If the foundation is not laid well, then everything that is above ground will eventually shift along with that which fails below ground. Great lofty cathedrals could be built but if they did not have a secure foundation they would soon crumble. So in the Christian life, that which is on the surface is only as sound as that which is laid first at the core level. You must continually shore up your foundation in the Christian life. You never simply leave the foundation alone and move on. You are only as mature as your foundation is strong and that foundation continually needs attention. Ephesians is foundational teaching. That does not mean that it is simplistic. It means that it is fundamental to the whole Christian life. You can't get beyond it. You must look deeply into it. You will benefit in every area of your life if you pursue it and work it for its gold. Ephesians personally has shaped me more than any other book of the Bible. I have read it more than any other. Studied it more than any other. I find that many of my thoughts about God and life have a tinting from Paul's words that here follow. They have shaped and molded not just my actions but my heart and I hope they will do the same for you.

Ask:

- *For thought: Make a list of the foundations upon which our modern, Western culture is built?*
- *How are they reflected in the ways that people interact with each other?*
- *In your understanding, what are some of the key foundations of the Christian life?*
- *How should they be reflected in the ways that Christians interact with each other and with the world around them?*

Context: Ephesians Intro

Ephesians is divided into two major sections. The first section deals with deep theological truths of which life as a Christian are founded upon. You might call the first section, Chapters 1-3, 'Being', or 'Foundation', or 'Motivation'. Most of the first section is a prayer. In fact chapter 1 contains one of the longest run-on sentences you will ever find as Paul prays to God expressing all that is true foundationally as a Christian. The second section, Chapters 4-6 deals with practical Christian, ethical living and you might call it, 'Doing', or 'Living it out', or 'Walking in the Spirit'. Both sections are rich in depth and insight.

As you read Ephesians, remember that it is indeed a letter and letters were meant to be read in their entirety. As you read or listen to a letter that is broken up week by week there is an inherent problem. The letter was meant to be inextricably tied together, but for the sake of a weekly lesson, you must

break it up. One of your jobs in studying will be to strive to maintain continuity to keep the fullness of what Paul writes intact. For example, chapters 1-3 have everything to do with the motivations for the practical applications of Chapters 4-6. Without the first section, the last becomes a series of law to live out in a performance mode of 'moralism'. Attached to Chapters 1-3 the second section becomes a beautiful portrait of responding to the blessings of God and internalizing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Read the Section: Ephesians 1:1-10

LOOK:

***Commentary:** This particular section is perhaps one of the greatest sections in the Bible on our identity as Christians. Paul enumerates for us the incredible blessings that we have been given as those who are 'in Christ'. If we do not know and internalize this information by His power and grace, we will never be the type of people that God wants us to be.

Background- Ephesians 1:1-2

1. Who is writing? What's an apostle? Are there still apostles today?

In the Bible, there are Big A Apostles and little a apostles. 'A'postles were ones commissioned directly by Jesus. The include the 12 disciples (minus Judas then the addition of Matthias to replace him, Acts 1:15-16.) Paul was declared an Apostle by association of meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. That is the complete list of 'A'postles. Yet as Christians, we are all 'a'postles called by God.

***Look at Acts 9:1-22 and Paul's missionary map**

This will help members grasp who Paul is, don't assume they know. You can ask some questions to observe the passage and help them understand where Paul is coming from as an author and Apostle.

2. On whose authority does he write? Why is that significant?

In our culture today there are a host of truth claims. Anyone can claim anything they want to and be heard. Christianity never asks us to believe anything that is not true! All claims made by the Bible claim to be truth from God, not from philosophy or another person's ideas but direct revelation from God. This stands out compared to any other philosophy of life.

3. Who is his audience; Christians or non-Christians? Why might that matter to us?

Vs. 1b- "To the saints in Ephesus". This letter was largely to Christians in Ephesus, though scholars believe it may be a cyclical letter to a wider audience in the region around Ephesus. The important thing is that it is to believers and should be read as a letter talking to believers about how to grow in Christ.

Foundations- Ephesians 1:3-10

1. Observe vs. 3-10 closely. What are the main themes in these 7 verses?

Spiritual blessings, common foundation in Christ, things that Christ has done for us, doctrines of faith- predestination, forgiveness, grace, redemption, God's glory

***Notebooks:** Make a list of what God has done for us in this section.

Leaders: Help them see that there are only 4-5 main blessings. This may help clear up the wordiness of the passage a bit. This will help you observe better

Let's look at some of the big concepts:

2. I hesitate to put this question here, right at the beginning of this study, but Paul raises the issue so I must. Vs. 4, 5, 11 use some pretty controversial words. "Chosen" and "Predestined". There have been more arguments derived from those words in the Bible perhaps than any other. I find students are enamored with talking about the free will vs. predestined controversy. But let me ask a couple questions to think about related to context first. What is the main problem going on in the Ephesian church that Paul wants to address? (look at 4:15-16 for a quick insight) Given the context, why might Paul include this section, vs. 3-14 and in particular use the words "Chosen" and "Predestined" in talking about the blessings the Ephesian believers ALL have in Christ?

If the Jewish and Gentile believers that make up the church have ALL been predestined and chosen doesn't that mean there is no boasting to be had? Doesn't it mean that there is no one group greater in God's eyes than another. Unity comes on the basis of a common foundation in which it is all God's work and none of their own. Isn't it profoundly interesting that a doctrine that has become so dividing actually is here meant for unity!? So, I am not going to spend much time here working out the doctrine. There are many good thinkers through the centuries that have battled the nuances of what each entails. Let me only say that Paul believes in predestination here. Yet, he preaches "for the sake of the elect" and is nearly stoned to death for their sakes. If it is all predestination, why does he preach? They will come to faith if God has ordained it! So I see in the Bible both working their way out. We are moral creatures responsible for real moral choices. Yet there is a king over all that predestines us to choose him or we would never choose him, our hearts are born in opposition to him. How this works out I simply don't know. In heaven the seminar Paul gives on "predestination and free will" will be well attended!

3. What does it mean that we are *holy* and *blameless* in His sight?

- Does it mean that we no longer sin?
- Does God really see us this way or does he just squint a little?
- What is the difference between *actual* righteousness and *imputed* righteousness?
- What about Jesus' work on the cross imputes his righteousness to us?
- Do you believe you are really seen this way by God?

This may be one of the most profound thoughts in Christian teaching. Christianity hinges on the truth that God has wiped our slate clean. To be sure thought, the word “imputed” is incredibly important. Imputed means- “ascribe (righteousness, guilt, etc.) to someone by virtue of a similar quality in another”. In other words, we have been ascribed what is the virtue of another, namely what is true of Jesus but not true of us. We have been given the same status of Jesus. He is holy and blameless and if we are “In Christ” or have repented and turned our lives to him, we are imputed his righteous life in the place of our unrighteous life. Wow! That is a transaction. So, it is not that we sin no more; it is not that we are necessarily even any ‘better’ than before salvation. But, God chooses to impute or credit “sinless” status to us. The only requirement is repentance- turning to God from our selves and allowing him to take the central position in our lives. It is totally from Him and nothing to do with our level of morality or sanctification.

- Why is this difficult to believe?
- What in our culture’s norms make it hard to believe in particular?
- What are the affects of knowing this truth?

We don’t like free gifts do we? We like to work hard and earn what we get. This flies in the face of our modern notions of you get what you work for. In this case, no amount of work could get what we are given... what we need.

The affects of getting this free gift are radical. It changes everything. You no longer need to work for salvation, but you work because of salvation. The first is done out of fear, the second out of gratitude. Grace produces life, earning something by work produces death.

4. What is the significance of being adopted as a son?

- What rights does an adopted son have?
- Why would God adopt us?
- Why according to this passage?

There is something very significant meant when God tells us we are adopted. An adopted son, particularly a first born adopted son has radical implications. Sorry ladies but the gender is important here. During this time period the first-born SON was given the major portion of the estate and carried on the family name. Thus when Paul writes we are adopted and given the status of first-born sons he is saying a lot with just a few words.

Think about it. What does God’s son own? What is his inheritance? Everything! “All things were created by him and for him”, (John 1:1-3). Have you ever felt like you don’t matter, that you are not significant? God does not give you that option! Adoption is the rock of all security in life. This is true security that won’t fade or leave. It can deal with our foundational issues as humans. (see article following)

5. What does redemption mean? Why is it a significant word in the Bible?

We don’t use the word very often any more. When I was a kid, we used to collect bottles and take them to the grocery store so we could get their “redemption” value. Usually they were worth 5cents a piece. In essence the drink manufacturer let us purchase the bottle with the drink in it and they would “buy it back” from us, the current owner. SO redemption in

the Bible has this same concept. It means to “buy back” what was sold to another. However the redemption value for a human life is far greater than the price of a bottle! You and I are of infinite value and only the death of a perfect King could pay the price.

“The forgiveness of sins” following “redemption” gives us further meaning into the use of the “redemption” here. This is a great example of when you observe well, interpretation is much simpler and can flow out of observation. Redemption here is akin to “forgiveness of sins” since this is the manner in which we are redeemed. The price is paid by Jesus death on the cross, which forgives our sins because they were placed on him instead of us.

- How do you think we really know whether or not we have been redeemed?

-Fruit: is a natural production of a fruit tree. If a tree does not produce fruit we would not call it a fruit tree. So if a Christian is truly a Christian, there will be fruit showing the redemption that has happened. There are plenty of warning passages in the Bible that alert us to beware if fruit is not being produced in our lives, perhaps there is no real foundation established from which to grow.

-Desire to grow: our heart’s desire to grow and be in fellowship with God is a confirmation of what has happened in the redemption of our lives.

-Witness of the spirit: Romans 8 says that there will be an internal witness from God to our spirit that we are indeed His children. This sounds fairly mystic...and it is. Of course many could claim from many different religions that they have an internal sign that it is true. And many do claim this. So as Christians we are told that indeed this can be a valid sign of redemption, but it is not the only sign and not to base our whole assurance of salvation upon. But, it seems like there should be, according to the Bible, a deep sense of the spirit’s presence inside a believer’s life at points in time.

-Faith: The ultimate way we know that we are redeemed is through God’s communication to us by his word where He communicates that those that are ‘in Christ’ are redeemed; look at 1 John 5:11-13.)

6. Vs. 6- “To the praise of His glorious grace”. Why is this statement (praise God’s glory) made in the Bible so many times?

- What do you think about the Christian teaching that God wants our praise and glory? Why does he? Isn’t that a bit self-centered and yet Jesus’ teaching flies against self-centeredness?
- What does it say about what our motivation should be in life?

If God is the greatest being in the universe, then the greatest possible occurrence in the universe is for that greatest being to be made more known! Think about it. As His greatness is known more and more fully in the universe, His greatness extends farther and farther and thus He emanates His glory to a greater extent! We have the ability as children of God to assist in the greatest purpose of the universe, to make His glory extend further and further...that is great! So really, glorifying God is simply what is most right and good in the universe. Furthermore, if we were created to glorify God, then when we do so we are doing what we were created for. It is best for a creature to do what they were created for. If a hammer tries to cook food, it will fail. But, if it tries to pound nails, it will be wild success. It is best for a hammer’s “satisfaction” to

hammer nails and not cook food. God has allowed us to do what is best for us and most satisfying and fulfilling to us.

Finally, It is wrong for us to be self-centered because we are not the greatest things in the universe. There are at least 6 billion other great things with as much worth as us. But, for God, he indeed is the greatest thing in the universe. He is the only one for whom it is not wrong to be self-centered. In fact, it would be wrong for him not to place himself at the center of all things because that would be a lie and lack of truth and righteousness. We should all be glad that he is the greatest thing and wants to be the center of all things for that is the way that the world was designed and will work best.

7. Vs. 7- "According to the riches of his grace, which he lavished on us with all wisdom and insight" - What does grace mean? What is the significance of God's grace in the Christian life?

God's Riches at Christ's Expense. Unmerited favor. Getting something we DON'T deserve/Mercy = NOT getting what we DO deserve.

None of us really like to receive grace. We like to earn things. We like to be in charge. We all want to be in the control seat of life somehow. I mean we do and we don't. We want to feel like we have earned something. Like if we do enough good, then God will award us. Of course, the opposite is true too. When we do bad, we really want a way out and to NOT get the negative reward. God designed salvation through a beautiful system of grace. We will never make ourselves right with God through our own works. Never. Holiness is the requirement of a holy God and there is no way to make our hearts holy.

Oh, maybe one could do all the right things on the outside, but on the inside, no way! All righteousness before God must be passive. That is, we must receive it from Him as a gift. There is no other logical way. That really makes sense when you consider that our striving to earn righteousness by being good and our falling into sin are the same thing. Did you read that? Doing good to earn God's favor and sinning is the same thing! They are both self-worship and self-reliance. Self-worship is the root of trying to please God- for we are really trying to get something from God or put him in our debt. Self-worship is also the root of blatant sin. Sinning is turning away from God's plans and character and following your own. Self-effort to get to God is neither his plan nor his character. In God's free grace given as a gift alone is there a way out.

- What are the results of not living in grace? Living in grace?
- Why was it so wise for God to show us grace?
- Can you think of other ways where we might be accepted by God?
- Application: How might you show grace to others around you?

6. vs. 7- As a Christian, what mysteries are we privy to? How are our lives changed once we know these things?

There is a spiritual world! There is one God and creator of all. He designed all of creation to orientate them selves around Him. Life was designed to work in this way. The pinnacle of his creation was humanity and he created us to have a relationship with Him and only in that

relationship does life have true meaning. These realities change everything! It is as if you wake up one morning and can see after being blind all your life. Colors burst, sounds are connected to images; its amazing to see! Things you anticipated to be true are not as you thought. Others are but just a bit different. Your world-view is altered forever.

***Notebooks:** How would you summarize this passage? What significance are these truths to you? Which truth makes the most difference to you personally?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

***Assignment:**

- Read Tim Keller article 'The Experience of Adoption'
- Read through Ephesians for 2nd and 3rd time this week following Inductive Bible Study Methods steps.
- Write down everything that interests you, or raises questions in your mind. List themes, ideas or words that you see repeated?

Leaders: *Begin next week asking for themes that they came up with. Ask, How did they arrive at them?)*

Suggested Reading: Abba's Child, Brennan Manning

Adoption in Christ

PART I. - UNDERSTANDING OUR ADOPTION

A. The importance of adoption

"The notion that we are children of God, His own sons and daughters... is the mainspring of Christian living... Our sonship to God is the apex of Creation and the goal of redemption."

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

"If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how he much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. [Adoption] is the highest privilege the gospel offers... I have heard it seriously argued that the thought of divine fatherhood can mean nothing to those whose human father was inadequate, lacking wisdom, affection or both, nor to those many more whose misfortune it was to have a fatherless upbringing... But this is silly. For it is just not true to suggest that in the realm of personal relations, positive concepts cannot be formed by contrast... The truth is that all of us have a positive ideal of fatherhood by which we judge our own and others' fathers [how else could we be unhappy with our bad fathers?], and it can safely be said that the person for whom the thought of God's perfect fatherhood is meaningless or repellant does not exist."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

B. Objections to and distortions of adoption

"The idea that all are children of God is not found in the Bible anywhere... The gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but through being born again. 'To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or of a husband's will, but born of God.' (Jn.1:12-13) Sonship to God, then, is a gift of grace. It is not a natural but an adoptive sonship, and so the New Testament explicitly pictures it."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

C. Adoption defined

"Adoption is not a change in nature, but a change in status. If we fail to see this truth, we will reject the power of our adoption... Adoption is a declaration God makes about us. It is irreversible, dependent entirely upon His gracious choice, in which He says: 'You are my son, today I have brought you into my family.'"

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

"The profound truth of Roman adoption was that the adoptee was taken out of his previous state and placed in a new relationship of son to his new father... All his old debts are cancelled, and in effect the adoptee started a new life as part of his new family... [On the one hand, the new father] owned all the [new offspring's] property, controlled his personal relationships, and had the rights of discipline. On the other hand, the father was liable for the actions of the adoptee, and each owed the other reciprocal duties of support and maintenance."

– Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, and Sons*

D. Biblical theology of adoption

"God and religion are not less than they were; the Old Testament revelation of the holiness of God, and its demand for humility in man, is presupposed throughout, but something has been added. A new factor has come in. New Testament believers deal with God as their Father."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

"According to our Lord's own testimony in John's Gospel, God's fatherly relation to him implied four things.

- First, fatherhood implied authority. The Father commands and disposes; the initiative which he calls his Son to exercise is the initiative of resolute obedience to his Father's will... (6:38; 17:4; 5:19; 4:34).
- Second, fatherhood implied affection. 'The Father loves the Son.' 'The Father hath loved me...' (5:20; 15:9-10). [3]
- Third, fatherhood implied fellowship. 'I am not alone, for my Father is with me' 'The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone...' (16:32; 8:29).
- Fourth, fatherhood implied honor. God wills to exalt his Son. 'Father... Glorify your Son.' 'The Father... has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son...' (17:1; 5:22-23).

All this extends to his adopted children. In, through, and under Jesus Christ their Lord, they are ruled, loved, companied, and honored by their heavenly Father..."
['Father... let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am...'] (17:23-24).

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Chapter 19

PART II – EXPERIENCING OUR ADOPTION

A. The status Christians have

“God sent his son... to redeem those under the law that we might receive the adoption [lit. the sonship].” Galatians 4:4-5

B. The experience Christians can have

“Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Galatians 4:6

“You did not receive the spirit of slavery again to fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God.” Romans 8:15-16

C. What is the experience of sonship?

“[We all have a native] inability to believe that salvation is entirely of God's grace and love... We are slow to realize the implications of that. We are sons, but we are in danger of having the mindset of hired servants. Furthermore, if there is nothing else the Devil can do to mar our joy in Christ, he will try to produce in us what our forefathers used to call a ‘bondage frame of spirit.’... That is why he sends us the Spirit of adoption. What is [that]? Paul says,

‘You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father’ (Rom.8:15-16)

...Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit... [which] brings us into a deep-seated persuasion that we really are the sons of God. If it is a fact that... God has adopted us into his family, then the Spirit assures us this is true, and enables us to live in the enjoyment of such a rich spiritual blessing... He sends his Spirit into our hearts, bringing us the deep spiritual and psychological security that rests on the objective fact that our sins are forgiven and we belong to the Lord.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

“ ‘Abba’ was the word that was used familiarly by children talking to their fathers... A child does not always address his father as ‘father;’ he uses terms such as ‘Papa,’ ‘Dad.’ That is the kind of meaning represented by this word ‘Abba.’ It was a... word lisped by a little child... But let us notice the word ‘cry’... we **cry** ‘Abba, Father.’ It is a very strong word, and clearly the Apostle has used it quite deliberately. It means a loud cry... it expresses deep emotion... What then does it imply? Obviously... real knowledge of God. God is no longer to us a distant God. He is not merely a God in whom we believe intellectually, theologically, theoretically, doctrinally only. All this is possible to one who is not a child of God at all... [Our]

worship and praying are spontaneous; it is the spontaneity of the child who sees the father... and not only spontaneity, but confidence. A little child has confidence. He does not analyze it... he **knows** that 'Abba' is his father. Grown-ups may be standing back at a distance and being very formal [with some great personage]; but the little child comes running in, rushes right in, and holds on to his father's legs. He has a right that no-one else has... It is instinctive... we **cry** 'Abba, Father.'"

– D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 8:5-17*

D. An example of the experience ("spirit") of sonship

The problem: "Because I did not believe God loved me on the basis of Christ's life, death, and resurrection –

The result: [therefore] I could not face the risk of seeing my sins as my own responsibility. So having tried to clear my conscience by blaming others, I turned on the afterburners and made myself busy with work and duty. Or to use Luther's analogy, I was full of active righteousness. I looked to my outward activity to feel good about myself, and judged others by my own active standards...

The turning: But now I understood what Luther was talking about: 'In the righteousness of faith we work nothing, we render nothing to God, but we only receive and allow another to work in us.' This is what he called a "passive righteousness" — a righteousness that is credited to our account through faith. This was Christ's righteousness, bought with the price of his blood on the cross. This I received by faith. The reason it had been so difficult for me to have a personal faith in Christ was that I had not experienced total forgiveness. But I had now brought real sins — including my attitudes of self-dependence and blame-shifting — to a real Savior, and they had been forgiven ...How awesome it is to be loved unconditionally by a holy, righteous God.

– Rose M. Miller, *From Fear to Freedom*

PART III – LIVING OUT OUR ADOPTION

To live "by faith" is not a general "positive attitude," but a deliberate attempt to fire the heart with a knowledge of who we are in Christ and to live consistently with that knowledge.

"Sonship, [therefore] must be the controlling thought — the normative category, if you like — at every point." (J.I.Packer).

Here are all the responsibilities or duties of the Christian life recast and understood in terms of sonship:

A. Responsibilities of adopted children:

1. New motivation

"If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?"

– John Owen, *Communion with God*

"A perfect man would never act from sense of duty; he'd always want the right thing more than the wrong one. Duty is only a substitute for love (of God and of other people) like a crutch which is a substitute for a [healthy] leg. Most of us need the crutch at times; but of course it is idiotic to use the crutch when our own legs (our own loves, tastes, habits, etc.) can do the journey on their own."

– C.S. Lewis *Letters* 18 July 1957

2. Obedience

"[The Sermon on the Mount] teaches Christian conduct not by giving a full scheme of rules and a detailed casuistry, to be followed with mechanical precision, but by indicating a broad and general way the spirit, direction and objectives, the guiding principles and ideals, by which the Christian must steer his course. It is often noted that this is... quite different from the tax-consultant type of instruction which was the stock-in-trade of Jewish lawyers and scribes in our Lord's day. What is less often noticed is that it is precisely the kind of moral instruction that parents are constantly trying to give their children — concrete, imaginative, teaching general principles from particular instances, and seeking all the time to bring the children to appreciate and share the parent's own attitudes and view of life... The all-embracing principles of conduct: [1] imitating the Father... (Mt.5:44-45,48)... [2] glorifying the Father [bringing him honor and credit before others] (Mt. 5:16; 6:9)... [3] pleasing the Father... (Mt.6:1)."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

3. Family resemblance

"'Gospel holiness'... was Puritan shorthand for authentic Christian living, springing from love and gratitude to God, in contrast with the spurious 'legal holiness' that consisted merely of forms, routines and outward appearances, maintained from self-regarding motives... [Gospel holiness] is simply a matter of a child of God being true to type, [resembling the Father]... expressing one's adoption in one's life... while it is certainly true that justification frees one forever from the need to keep the law as a means of earning life, it is equally true that adoption obliges us to keep the law as the means of pleasing one's newfound Father. Law-keeping [is transformed now, it is] **the family likeness of God's children**... [Now] the sins of God's children do not destroy their justification or nullify their adoption, but they mar the children's fellowship with [and their family likeness to] the Father..."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

4. Trust

"All Christians are, in fact, called to a life of faith, in the sense of following God's will at whatever cost and trusting him for the consequences. But all are tempted to put status and security, in human terms, before loyalty to God; and then, if they resist that temptation, they are at once tempted to worry about the likely effect of their stand... On those thus tempted in the life of faith, Jesus brings the truth of their adoption to bear... 'Do not worry about your life... your heavenly Father knows what you need...' (Mt.6:31-33)"

5. Acceptance of discipline

"In this world, royal children have to undergo extra training and discipline which other children escape, in order to fit them for their high destiny. It is the same with the children of the King of kings. The clue to understanding all his dealings with them is to remember that throughout their lives he is training them for what awaits them, and chiseling them into the image of Christ."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

B. Privileges of adopted children:

Here are all the privileges or blessings of the Christian life recast and understood in terms of sonship:

1. Assurance

"Social experts drum into us these days that the family unit needs to be stable and secure, and that any unsteadiness in the parent-child relationship takes its toll in strain, neurosis and arrested development in the child himself. The depressions, randomness and immaturities that mark children of broken homes are known to us all. But... in God's family... you have absolute stability and security. The very concept of adoption is itself proof and guarantee of the preservation of the saints, for only bad fathers throw their children out of the family, even under provocation..."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

2. Prayer and intimacy

"This is what prayer really means: knowing that we have a secure relationship with God in which we can address him in the knowledge that he cares, and has the power to aid us... Jesus encourages us to pray simply. This distinguishes the child of God from the hypocrite. The hypocrite is so unsure of his relationship with God (and rightly so!) that he thinks of prayer in terms of its length and eloquence; the child of God knows he is speaking to the Father, and talks simply and directly... Jesus also encourages us to pray boldly... Boldness [which is] impudence in a neighbor is the privilege of the children of the family."

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

3. Freedom and confidence

"The parable of the prodigal son epitomizes the disposition of some Christians, even when they are restored to fellowship with God. Lurking in their hearts there often remains this sneaking suspicion: 'I am not worthy to be God's son, but perhaps I can struggle through as one of his hired servants' [see Luke 15:19]. At the root of such thinking is an inability to believe that salvation is entirely of God's grace and love. We contribute nothing to it; we can do nothing to earn it in any way. We are often slow to realize the implications of that. We are sons, but we are [always] in danger of having the mindset of hired servants....the Devil...will try to produce in us what our forefathers called 'a bondage frame of spirit'... [When Paul says in Romans 8:15 that God sends us 'a Spirit of sonship' rather than a spirit of fear, he means] God sends His Spirit into our hearts, bringing us the deep spiritual and psychological security that rests on the objective fact that... we belong to the Lord."

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

4. Fellowship and connection

"We are to learn to accept and appreciate one another, no matter what natural differences might separate us... Rich and poor alike are to be treated as brothers... [We are to never give up on one another — to both confront and forgive in proportions as great as required.] Such a mixture of discipline and forgiveness is conceivable only within a family context... No family finds failure easy to handle... [But] only when we realize that the Church is a family, that we are brothers and sisters in that family, will we have a right perspective from which to view those who fail badly, and a right motive to see them disciplined faithfully, and welcomed back with many reaffirmations of our love... These are all part of what it means to 'keep on loving each other as brothers.' (Heb.13:1)"

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

5. Inheritance

"Adoption is incomplete in this world. John says that... we are God's children, but it does "not yet appear what we shall be" in the future... (I John 3:1-3). Similarly, Paul teaches that although we have already received the Spirit of adoption... (Romans 8:15), we are still waiting for the full experience of our sonship, for 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). The redemption of our bodies, our adoption in all its glory, takes place at the final resurrection. Then... the image [family resemblance] now under repair will be completed."

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

Lesson 2: Serious Power

Ephesians 1:11-14

HOOK:

***Context:** In this section, Paul continues the theme of spiritual blessings that are found in Christ. One of the foundational blessings is the gift of the person of the Trinitarian God, the Holy Spirit. Paul gives us some concise and profoundly rich theology regarding the Holy Spirit in these few verses. Then he goes on to pray for us that we might 'know' these truths in a deep experiential way. Today let's investigate these two verses on the Holy Spirit and expand our study by looking at some other places where he is mentioned.

Ask:

- *When you think of the word 'Trinity' what things come to mind.*
- *What member of the Trinity would you say you know the MOST about?*
- *Which do you know the LEAST about?*
- *Why do you think this is true?*

Read the Section: Ephesians 1:11-14

LOOK:

The seal, the Holy Spirit- Ephesians 1:11-14

1. What do you know about the Holy Spirit? What is His role? What is His character?

2. What is His role in this section? **1:11-14**

- When does the Holy Spirit come inside someone's life?
- According to this section, when will he leave?
- Why could the Holy Spirit in our lives be an extension of "the purpose of Him who works everything according to His will" (vs. 11b)?

One of the roles of the Holy Spirit in a person's life is a confirmation of salvation. In this passage he is a 'seal'-this is an ancient concept where an authority marked a letter only to be opened by the recipient. Furthermore, he is a 'deposit'-guaranteeing a purchase. If one backs out of the purchase, the deposit is lost. Could God ever send a part of Himself to hell? Then the deposit guarantees our future. Finally, he is an "inheritance". There is a great future ahead guaranteed by the Spirit. God's will is that his people would walk with him and live with him for eternity. The Holy Spirit guides and allows this to happen. He is the power for humans to live a regenerated life that will last until the day Christ returns.

*Let's expand our theology of the Holy Spirit. Look at **John 14:12-31 and John 16:4-15** and fill out the columns with what you see from the Holy Spirit.

Role

Character

***Notebooks:** What did you learn about the Spirit in these passages?

3. If someone were to ask you about the Holy Spirit, how would you summarize your understanding?

"He" is a person! His characteristics are not that of a spiritual ghostlike entity, but we can relate to him as person. He is a counselor that guides. He is active. He takes the information from Christ and makes it known to us. The way we know Christ's information is to get it from the Word of God itself.

Walking in the Spirit-

Look at these next passages related to 'Walking in the Spirit', they may be familiar passages to many of you, but have you ever seen them in the context of the Holy Spirit? These passages are really about what it means to live with the power of the Holy Spirit that we have seen above, inside our lives moment by moment.

Leaders: *Break up into smaller groups and discuss then come back to the large group*

1. Look at **John 15:1-8**- Where do you see the work of the Holy Spirit? What is our part and what is His?

This is Jesus speaking and the two major players seem to be the Father, Jesus, and you and I. However Jesus is leaving soon right? The HS is about to take the role that Jesus had on earth as he indwells each of us. We are to abide in him and he will produce fruit in us. A tree does not concentrate on bearing fruit, (I don't know really!) but I think the tree probably has to focus on the soil in which he lives and opening their leaves up to the sun. Once the tree does their part, the rest happens naturally. The soil and sun do their work in partnership with the tree.

2. Look at **Romans 12:1-2**- What is our part and what is His?

- If someone says they want to 'know God's will' what should our question be?
- How do we renew our minds?

3. Look at **Ephesians 4:17-24**- What is the difference between the two types of people? What is our part and what is His?

***Notebooks:** Summarize what it means to "walk in the spirit" according to these passages. What holds you from 'walking in the Spirit'? What occupies your heart or mind apart from the Spirit?

4. Read "Life Through the Spirit" article with the whole group. Find it at cruatunc.com/discipleship-resources

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

***Assignment:** Listen to: God the Holy Spirit (talk by Miles O'Neill) at cruatunc.com/resources

Suggested Reading: God the Holy Spirit, Martyn Lloyd Jones

Lesson 3- The Heart and the Head

Ephesians 1:15-23

HOOK:

***Context:** The key to this section is found in the word, “know” in vs. 17. In Greek there are many words that are translated into the English verb, “to know”. Here “know” is one of the many Greek words of that meaning, but it is NOT the common Greek word ‘gnosis’ which relates to ‘head knowledge’. It is rather ‘epignosis’ which has to do with experiential or heart knowledge. This verb shapes much of Paul’s theology on living out the Christian life in response to all that Christ has done for us. It entails “Encountering” the living God at a heart level and “Responding” to him.

Ask:

- What is the difference between ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’, ‘head knowledge’ and ‘heart knowledge’?
- Which has greater impact in changing a person’s life? (This is not just a rhetorical question. Think about the impact both types of knowledge can have and their affects.)

Read the Section: Ephesians 1:5-23

***Notebooks:** Before you begin this study, outline this section highlighting specifics Paul is praying for the Ephesians. Focus on the verb phrases for a hint.

LOOK:

Know the Father- Vs. 1:17

1. What would the results be of someone having just head knowledge of the father?
2. What would be the results of someone having just heart knowledge?

Head knowledge is really important. You can have “heart” knowledge that simply is an emotion and has nothing to do with the “truth” of a person or situation. However, once we have developed some head knowledge, “heart” knowledge or experiential knowledge transforms information into life-changing reality. It leads to real life and action change. We need both head AND heart knowledge. One without the other can both be detrimental to a healthy, mature Christian faith. Can you think of examples in life where people are affected by their heart OR mind and then both...what are the results?

***Read:** the article at the end of this lesson together. Discuss the different legs that Packer talks about. Perhaps draw out the different types of people together. It isn’t that either the heart, head or hands are better than the others, but there must be a balance.

***Context:** The word 'to know' continues its influence in the rest of this section however, the word "know" is now the Greek word "eido" not "epignosis". But, "eido" also has the "experiential" knowledge component like "epignosis". It means to "perceive with the senses". Thus, Paul continues to pray for a 'heart knowledge' in each of the next three areas.....

Know the hope- Ephesians 1:18a

1. What is the hope that we are given as Christians both now and eternally?

-Before you answer the basic answers, think about the context the Ephesian church finds themselves in. If you were in persecution or in some sort of troubled times, what would be your hope as a Christian?

Hope gives us a reason to live. What we hope for captures our attention and our passions and keeps us going. However, I wonder if often times our hope as Christians has been shallow and unconvincing because we are not convinced that life with Christ is that joyful. We must realize that throughout the New Testament there is a continuing theme of 'already not yet'. That is as a Christian, we are 'saved' from sin, but we are not yet done with sin like we will be some day. We are now experiencing salvation and healing in life, but not fully like we will some day. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father reigning, but not as we will fully experience Him some day. The Kingdom of God has been inaugurated but it has not been brought to completion as it will be on the day of Christ's return. This is very significant in light of the prayer for us to 'know the hope to which we have been called'. We are to experience some of that hope now, but we must realize that it is still just a glimpse of what is to come. Someday, the joy, which we experience in part now, will be our constant experience.

Furthermore, we have been sold a wrong view of heaven. We have somehow picked up a thought of heaven as some ethereal other worldly place for our souls. I am sorry, but that is no hope to me! The resurrection of Christ points us to another scenario. He is resurrected in His body. We are told that we will also be resurrected in a new body, to a new earth, to a new heaven. Time is much too short here to fully articulate, but I believe the Bible continually points us to a 'heaven' that is more full, more real and more lifelike than most of us have imagined. Ethereal ghostlike existence is no hope at all. A resurrected body, on a restored earth, reigning with God in his fulfilled kingdom is indeed a hope worth living for and I believe that that is what we will be given. We have fallen victims to an old Platonic philosophy of dualism- which separates the spirit from the earthly. The earthly was deemed bad and a retreat to the spiritual nature was redemptive. We have thus bought in to the lie that says heaven is some sort of spiritual experience away from the body. That is simply not Biblical. God created the heavens and the earth as 'good'. There is not one better than the other. Heaven is not 'up' and the earth 'below' and hell 'farther below'. Those are only concepts that our language has lead us to. Salvation is not retreat from the body, but integration of the spiritual and the earthly in redemption and complete good. This may be more than you wanted to think about tonight, but heaven will be much closer to our reality as we know it, only redeemed, than we have ever thought. That is truly beautiful and worthy of our hope! (for more read 'Surprised by Hope' by N.T Wright)

2. Look at **Revelation 21** together. What picture of heaven do you get from this passage?

3. In order to “know” this hope, we need to have our eyes of our hearts opened. What does this mean?

There is a supernatural awakening of things that are true that needs to take place at an experiential heart level. This is the theme of the section. It is not enough to “know” that there is a great hope that awaits us in part now, and fully later. We have to have our hearts broken open to taste just a bit of that reality.

Jonathan Edwards was perhaps the greatest mind America has ever produced. He talked about the difference between knowing that honey is sweet and tasting that honey is sweet. The two are indescribably different. Having a head knowledge with no experience may not get you off the couch to fetch some honey. However, if you have indeed tasted, it may actually get you off the couch into a tree, fighting bees and bears to grab a finger full. (Not me, I don't like honey but that is besides the point!)

How can this head knowledge enter our hearts? We have to ask. That is what Paul is praying for the Ephesian church. That their heart eyes would be open to see the wonders of the glorious hope. To taste the hope. To see it clearly. To behold it. Have you ever prayed a prayer like this?

Know the riches- Ephesians 1:18b

1. There are some profound passages written by Paul that enumerate all that is true of us when we are “In Christ”. List the riches under each of these passages.

Ephesians 1:3-14

Colossians 2:9-15

Romans 8

2. What is most beautiful to you? What are the ‘already’s’ and what are the ‘not yet’s’?

Know the power- Ephesians 1:19-23

1. This power is defined as that which raised Christ from the dead and now is at work in us! Do you sense that the God of the universe, the most powerful being in all eternity is alive and at work in your life...? it!

- Why did Paul believe that there was such power available? How did he arrive to the place where he believed this?
- What was his assurance of power based upon? (Look over Ephesians 1:1-23)
- What do you currently need power for?
- Have you sensed power in your life as a Christian?
- Where is there a lack of power in your life?

***Notebooks:** Make a list of all the attributes from this passage that Christ has been given.

2. How do we go from 'gnosis' (head knowledge) to 'epignosis' (heart knowledge) in the above areas?

First, we have to ask! God wants to give us more. He wants us to want more so that he can give us more. That takes place as we spend time in meditation on the character of God in the Bible. God can meet us there to build the knowledge into our hearts and not just heads. Also, spending time in Christian community and allowing others to influence us as they are influenced by the Spirit is a way that God uses. Unfortunately, also many times going through trials and hardships puts us in a place where we might finally stop, look and listen. Sometimes God needs to shake us, "Pain is God's megaphone to a dying world" C.S. Lewis says.

3. Think about it. The power that we have is the power that God has when he raised Jesus from the dead. (vs. 20) If that is true, what sort of hope does it give you that you truly can experience heart knowledge of God? (Again, this is not a rhetorical question. I want you to finish talking about this. What encouragement does it give you? What might it change about your outlook this week?)

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

***Assignment:**

- Read 'Being Well Developed' by Guy Armstrong (article following)
- Complete the list of riches above.
- Make a short outline of what we have studied so far.
- **Bonus assignment Compare Galatians 5, Ephesians 4:17-6:9, Rom 8, John 15

(This assignment looks comparatively at 4 passages dealing with the Holy Spirit. Make 4 columns side by side and compare and contrast everything the passages say about 'walking in the spirit', darkness vs. life, death vs. life etc. ...there are many ways these passages communicate about 'walking in the spirit'. This is a great assignment that helps them gain a Biblically observed perspective of what it really means according to two NT authors to walk in the spirit.)

Suggested Reading: Surprised by Hope, N.T. Wright; Heaven, Randy Alcorn

Being Well Developed

Guy Armstrong

In JI Packer's book, *Rediscovering Holiness*, he likens holiness to a three-legged stool. The three legs are D (doctrine: truth taken into the mind and heart to live by), E (experience: the conscientious pursuit and conscious enjoyment of fellowship with the Father and the Son), and P (practice: in the sense of the specific and habitual response of obedience to the doctrinal truth one has received). The point of his illustration is that the stool cannot stand on less than the three legs, just as holiness cannot exist where each of these three "legs" are equally undeveloped.

In describing unhealthy spiritual growth, Packer draws 3 stick figures that are out of proportion.

#1 This stick figure has a huge head on his stick figure frame

#2 This stick figure has a huge abdomen on his stick figure frame

#3 This stick figure has huge legs on his stick figure frame.

Stick figure #1 represents the Christian whose passion is all for doctrine, and whose discipleship revolves around the study of theology

This person is often exploring questions of truth, unfulfilled prophecy, symbolic chapters of Revelation and problems of Bible harmony. He or she is not much concerned about experience, not very active in obedience and service of others and not distinguished for a radically changed life. But the head is always busy with theological questions, and is full to overflowing with doctrine.

Stick figure #2 represents the Christian whose Christianity is not much concerned with doctrine, but who relies heavily on constantly churned-up feelings and exciting experiences (hence, the huge abdomen).

This type of Christian is zealous for experience. He or she is often running around to meetings, worship events etc in hopes of being warmed up to the point where the glorious feeling of being in God's presence is renewed. This Christian is not outstandingly active in trying to change the world for the Lord (hence, the matchstick legs).

Stick figure #3 represents the Christian who isn't very interested in doctrine, or even experience, but rather in activity.

This type of Christian is the restless do-gooder whose interest is not in doctrinal truth or in the devotional disciplines of the spiritual life, but in programs, organizations, and world-changing tasks of one sort or another. This Christian is always on the go and always moving (hence, the over-developed legs).

Conclusions/ Thoughts to Ponder:

Each of the qualities highlighted above can be well and good when they are not overemphasized at the exclusion of the others.

*Draw the above figure and answer these questions....

1. What happens when we fail to maintain a balanced concern for truth, experience and action?
2. Are you presently overemphasizing one of the above at the exclusion of the others? What do you believe the Lord would have you do about this? (try to be practical)

A Note from the author:

In my own life I can certainly see “cycles of distortion” that have plagued me as a Christian. My early years as a Christian were probably characterized by activity. Activity and doctrine characterized my life for quite some time as well. Now, as I grow older, it seems I can easily overemphasize doctrine and emotion and lessen my activity level. That is probably why I am so drawn to people alive today and in history who seem to have a true balance that yields a well-balanced fruit of holiness.

Source:

Jl Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, pgs 167-170.

Lesson 4– The Transformed Life

Ephesians 2:1-10

HOOK:

***Context:** Life transformation is the mark of a true Christian. We have gone from death to life and as such, a Christian's whole world has changed. The next section looks at the transformation that has happened and begins to set us forward for what it should look like in our lives.

Ask:

- What changes in someone who becomes a Christian?
- How much do they need to change to be a Christian?
- How do you know if you are a Christian or not?
- What if the above things don't change?

Read the Section: Ephesians 2:1-10

LOOK:

Old Life- Ephesians 2:1-5

1. In order to explore the transformation that is talked about in 2:1-10, we have to wrestle with the topic of what causes spiritual death in a person's life-sin. What is sin? How do you define it?

In our culture, this is a heated question, or perhaps I am over spoken, it is actually NOT heated today because it has become an irrelevant question. The thought of 'sin' is seen as a narrow minded, intolerant form of social control. Sin it is said, is an outdated concept that has no foundation. Each is free to make up his or her mind about what is right, wrong, true or false. The Bible stands in abrupt contradiction of such a philosophy.

First, in the Bible, sin is not determined randomly, but is determined by God Himself. It not an arbitrary set of rules. Sin is determined by the fullest 'truth' there is; God's character and who He is in Himself. God is pure and holy. We are created in God's image. Anything that is not pure and holy violates the design of our creation and therefore is sin, or "misses the mark" for which we were created. When we who are created in God's image do not act in a way that represents that image we fall short of our design. This is sin.

Kierkegaard adds that sin is doing anything not motivated out of love for God. That gets to the core of "missing the mark". It is not that sin is just doing something commonly thought of as bad, but sin is doing even "good" things for the wrong reason. Therefore it is not just an action that is sin, but the heart behind the action. Actually, actions are just surface sin issues. It is the heart claiming autonomy from God or self-worship that is the real root of sin.

The Bible is very clear on the consequences of sin. Though God loves us infinitely he is also just and also holy- or rather, his love is a holy and just love, He simply cannot tolerate sin by his holy standards and must punish sin by his standard of justice. We are each guilty of violating God's perfection and therefore deserve to be eternally separated from God, which is

spiritual death. Out of this fact flows the story of scripture and indeed the situation that Paul's readers understood about their past and the situation that we must understand and find ourselves in today as well.

2. What does death mean? What are some synonyms? What or whom does death affect?

Let's be honest, those of you that trusted Christ at 6 weren't too far down the road to perdition when Christ rescued you! But what do you think the guy two days away from execution on death row feels when a pardon comes? We were dead before Christ! We have got to understand what the reality of death means and feels like. We don't really feel that we were dead so we don't appreciate what we have been saved from.

Most of the problem results from our lack of understanding how truly wonderful, holy, perfect and pure God is. We evaluate our own righteousness and hence our standing before God on how we stack ourselves up against others around us..."at least I am better than them"! We must see God more rightly so that we see ourselves more rightly, so that we are motivated to live rightly in light of who God is. Take a look at this quote from Calvin written almost 500 years ago...humans haven't changed much:

"It is evident that man never arrives at true self-knowledge before he has looked into the face of God and then come away to look at himself. For (such is our innate pride) we always seem to ourselves just and upright, wise and holy until we are convinced, by clear proof, of our injustice and deviousness, stupidity and impurity. However, we are never convinced of this if we simply look to ourselves and not to the Lord as well, since he is the only yardstick from which this conviction can come. For since we all have a tendency to hypocrisy, any hollow appearance of righteousness is quite enough to satisfy us, instead of righteousness, itself. Since there is nothing in us or around us that is not greatly tainted with impurity, as long as we are assessing limits of human corruption, anything, which is slightly less putrid, makes us very pleased without ourselves. It is like an eye, which has never been shown anything other than black, assessing an object, which is really off-white or discolored, as pure white. To take this further: if, at midday, we look down at the ground or on any object, which is lying around, we think our eyesight is strong and accurate. But when we look up at the sun and gaze at it with no protection, the vision which was fine for earth is so dazzled and confused by the brilliant sunlight that we have to admit that clear sight for earthly things is very dim when applied to heavenly. It is exactly the same when it comes to assessing our spiritual qualities. So long as we do not look further than those around us, we are quite satisfied with our own righteousness, wisdom and virtue; we assess ourselves in very flattering terms as being well on the way to perfection! However, as soon as we lift our thoughts to God and reflect on his nature and how absolutely perfected he is in righteousness, wisdom and virtue, we realize that this is the standard to which we must conform. Then what previously made us very pleased by its deceptive outward goodness, we will see as tainted with the blackest sin; what before deceived us unbelievably, by masquerading as wisdom, will revolt us by its extreme folly; and what looked like commendable activity will be judged pathetic weakness. In just this way, even the qualities in us which seem most admirable are worlds away from God's purity and can never match it."

-The Institutes of Christian Religion 1:1:2, John Calvin

3. Is there an example of a movie, a scene, a thought that really captures the thoughts and emotions tied to "death" that you can think of?

**When a Man Loves a Woman (circa 1994) does it for me. This movie shows a death relationally that comes about from sin related to alcoholism. There is a scene when the dad (Andy Garcia) tells his little girls that their mom (Meg Ryan) has to leave for a while...(She is going to get alcohol treatment). It was heart wrenching for me to see the pain in the young eyes...no dad should have to tell his girls something as hurtful to young hearts as that. I will give you another: Schindler's List. Do you remember when the boy in the Nazi camp is hiding and he jumps into the waste of the outhouse. Instantly I was brought to thinking about the smell he endured...Putrid, foul, inexpressible really. That is the smell of death that we should understand about the state of our hearts without God's grace. What would it feel like to be taken from the outhouse, to the Whitehouse, cleaned up, given new clothes and presented to the President? That is how we have been transformed. We have been saved from death into life! But unless we really see the deep pain and stench sin causes to ourselves, to others and most importantly to God, we don't really realize the lifesaver we have been given.*

4. What does it mean that we were "dead in our sins, in which you once walked... following the course of the world"?

5. Then it goes on to say that that way we were walking was "following the prince of the power of the air". Who is that? What's the point?

It's Satan! Though he is not in ultimate control, God has allowed him a time-period where he rules on earth. Who are we following when we sin then? The conclusion is pretty poignant. Say it out loud...we need to hear it out loud to feel the weight.

6. Read **Ezekiel 28:11-19**- What happened to the 'king of Tyre', (many commentators think that though a specific king, he is an allusion for Satan)?

He was shamed and belittled in front of the heavens.

7. What insight do you gain into Satan's motivation in the world now?

Retaliation against God in revenge!

8. How would Satan take revenge against God to hurt God the most?

Hurt god's children. I actually can think of nothing worse than someone harming my wife or children. I would gladly take the place for them if they were to be harmed. In fact, if someone really wanted to hurt me, they would succeed in a far greater way by hurting my family

***Notebooks:** Summarize vs. 2:1-4

***Context:** Some commentator has said that this is the greatest “but” in the Bible. He was trying to be funny, but you should see his point. This is incredible, “but God!”

New Life- Ephesians 2:4-9

1. Why did God step in while we were following Satan? (look at vs. 4-10 and make a list)

*He is rich in mercy
Because of his great love
To show his grace
So he might show off Jesus’ riches and kindness
So we would live in God’s good works*

2. Why is it significant that he “made us alive”, “even when we were dead in our trespasses”?

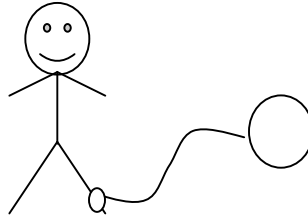
This is one of the truths of the Bible that really gets into my heart. It wasn’t while we were trying to follow God that he made us alive. It wasn’t while we were “generally good” people that he came to us. It wasn’t while we were working on a Habitat for Humanity house build. It was when we were dead in our trespasses. We were completely dead! We were filthy. We were uttering curses against God.

You don’t think so? You are not arguing with me, but with the Bible! Remember, anything done from selfish motivation... even trying to please God which... to please yourself... is selfish and deserves the pit of hell! It is not just “sort of bad” it is evil compared the surpassing holiness of a perfect God and deserving of his eternal punishment. “We were by nature children of wrath”. That is hard to hear, but we are not born as “children of God”. Yes, we are God’s creation. But not “children of God” until we come into relationship with Him having our rebellious sins forgiven. If we are not “for” him, then we are “against” him and that requires that his wrath is against us.

This is hard teaching of the Bible. But it is so rich and important as well. If we are not really, really bad off without a relationship with God, then we are not really well off once we have been forgiven. Grace is not that great if we don’t need it that badly. Grace is “amazing” if it is the only way out of our despair.

3. Read: **Galatians 5:16-17**, Romans **8:7-8, 19-21**- Notice the control structures in this passage. Who or what do you see that controls? What are the results of the controlling powers?

*Bondage Diagram



After reading these passages, place the following pieces onto the diagram.

- 1) *The figure is bound to the ball and chain of sin before they are in Christ (Write sin in the ball).*
- 2) *Trusting Christ breaks the chain and relationship to sin (draw a line through the chain breaking it).*
- 3) *Now the person of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit speaks to us, leads us and guides us. (Draw a picture of the cross and attach a chain to it)*
- 4) *We are no longer forced to sin and we have a new birth. Satan though is still there in the shadows. One of his main ploys is to make us believe that the relationship to sin still exists and that it is more pleasing to live serving him (draw a pitchfork carrying devil speaking in the ear of the person).*
- 5) *We have to know that death is gone and life has come. We need to live for life not death any longer. (Draw a picture of the HS whispering into the other ear of the person.) The world may call it our conscience, but the Christian realizes that there is a spiritual world and there are competing voices that speak to us.*

The spirit of God has set us free from our bondage to sin by the Son's work on the cross. Not only has he set us free, but through the resurrection, we have been "imputed" Christ's righteousness. (Remember chapter 1) Therefore, we are not just an empty slate detached from sin. We now have a totally new disposition attached to Christ. This is new life! The old way has gone. The new way has come. However, there is still a guy out there named Lucifer that wants to hurt God and his kingdom. He can still do damage and that is now his goal. He wants you to forget and live like you are trapped to the old system. He wants you to think that your relationship to sin is still engaged and frustrate you to live defeated lives. If you are defeated in your Christian life, what kind of witness will you be? What kind of representation of Christ will you give to the world? Satan has lost the war, but he still fights battles.

4. Ephesians 2:8-9 may be two of the most famous... and most important verses in the Bible. Let's walk through them together.

- For by grace- What is grace? (see above)
- You have been saved- What does saved mean? Saved from what? (see above)
- Through faith- What is faith?

Trust, belief in action. Sitting down in a chair shows you not only believe it's a solid chair, but have faith that it is.

- Not of your own doing, but a gift from God- What do you do in order to receive a gift?

Nothing! You only have to reach out at least. People give gifts because of their benevolence, not your benevolence.

- Not as a result of work so that no one should boast- If you work for something, is it a gift?

That's the exact point. God could not have said it any clearer. You cannot earn it. If you could, you would get the credit. If it is from God alone, he gets the credit. The whole world is shaped to point towards his glory, not ours. It's a fundamentally reordering of the way that humans think about life.

***Notebooks:** Are there any signs of death in your life that show you have not fully embraced the Gospel? What causes you to go back to the 'old life'? What lies deeper in your hearts as you go back against your new life? Have you received the good news of Jesus' death on the cross by faith rather than works? If not, you can do so now. Here is a simple yet profound prayer:

God, I believe in you and I admit that I need you. You created me to center my life on you. I have offended you by trying to find life and freedom apart from you. Thank you for dying on the cross in my place. I want you to forgive me of my sin towards you. Thank you for rising again so that I can have a new life. Come into my life and change me to be a worshiper of you, rather than a worshiper of myself. Amen

5. How can knowing and believing vs. 8-9 change you foundationally and move you towards holiness away from sin?

Puritan Pastor John Owen says efforts to stop sin that come from "convictions of the law" will only temporarily stop "particular sins", but those who seek to weaken sin "by the Spirit of the Gospel" will change the whole person- mind will and affections. Owen is saying here that mortification (killing sin) arising from only the convictions of the law- that is from a belief that we can "save ourselves" through our own efforts- cannot really change the sinful heart. It can only squelch behavior temporarily through external pressure. It is the truths of the gospel- Jesus' dying love, his unconditional commitment to us, his costly sacrifice, and our adoption into God's family- that makes the sin itself hateful in our eyes. This God-centered way of confessing and forsaking sin is a powerful instrument of change. Fear of consequences changes behavior through external coercion- the inner impulses remain. However a desire to please and honor the one who saved you and who is worthy of all praise- that changes you from the inside out. Tim Keller, Prayer pg. 217

Purposeful Life- Philippians 2:10

1. Verse 10 is often left off as people quote this section, why do you think that might be?

We like grace, but grace calls us to works! It is not that we get grace by our works, but grace is for a purpose not and end in itself. What's more is that in a culture that longs to have an impact in the world, this verse, while always being important, takes on even that much more meaning. We must not leave it off. We must not stay stagnant holding onto cheap grace. We are called to something good, to have a part in the restoration of God's kingdom! Don't leave this verse out of Ephesians 2:8-10!

2. What is significant about God preparing these "works" in advance for us to do?

God does not go about things reactionary. He has had a plan from the beginning. You are the product of his plan. So you don't like who you are or how you were made or what experiences you have had...then you don't like God because he made you that way for a great purpose! He has great plans for you and you are created unique and special! Before the beginning of time he created you and knew you!

3. What is the significance that we are God's workmanship?

Again, He made us for a reason. We are not a mistake. Our family background is not a mistake. Our gender is not a mistake. Our looks are not a mistake. Even our struggles are not mistakes. He created us in unique, sometimes peculiar ways for things that only we could do given our designs.

4. What is the motivation to do good works? They don't do anything for our salvation or for our acceptance, then why do them?

5. What works might Christ be leading you to? How do you know?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

***Assignment:**

- Read: 'The Importance of Hell', Tim Keller (article following)
- Take a notebook and scan the whole book of Ephesians. List the Death characteristics that Paul mentions and the Life Characteristics in two different columns?

Suggested Reading: All of Grace, Andrew Murray; Grace Awakening, Charles Swindoll; Don't Waste Your Life, John Piper

The Importance of Hell

by Tim Keller

There are plenty of people today who don't believe in the Bible's teaching on everlasting punishment, even those who do find it an unreal and a remote concept. In 2003 a research group discovered 64% of Americans expect to go to heaven when they die, but less than 1% think they might go to hell. Not only are there plenty of people today who don't believe in the Bible's teaching on everlasting punishment, even those who do find it an unreal and a remote concept. Nevertheless, it is a very important part of the Christian faith, for several reasons.

1. It is important because Jesus taught about it more than all other Biblical authors put together.

Jesus speaks of "eternal fire and punishment" as the final abode of the angels and human beings who have rejected God (Matthew 25:41,46) He says that those who give into sin will be in danger of the "fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22; 18:8-9.) The word Jesus uses for 'hell' is Gehenna, a valley in which piles of garbage were daily burned as well as the corpses of those without families who could bury them. In Mark 9:43 Jesus speaks of a person going to "hell [Gehenna], where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' " Jesus is referring to the maggots that live in the corpses on the garbage heap. When all the flesh is consumed, the maggots die. Jesus is saying, however, that the spiritual decomposition of hell never ends, and that is why 'their worm does not die.'

If Jesus, the Lord of Love and Author of Grace spoke about hell more often, and in a more vivid, blood-curdling manner than anyone else, it must be a crucial truth. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says, "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." He is speaking to disciples, some of whom will eventually be tortured, sawn in half, flayed and burned alive. Yet, he says, that is a picnic compared to hell. Clearly, for Jesus hell was a real place, since he said that after judgment day people would experience it in their bodies. Hell is a place not only of physical but also of spiritual misery.

Jesus constantly depicted hell as painful fire and "outer darkness" (Matt 25:30; cf. Jude 6,7,13,) a place of unimaginably terrible misery and unhappiness. If Jesus, the Lord of Love and Author of Grace spoke about hell more often, and in a more vivid, blood-curdling manner than anyone else, it must be a crucial truth. But why was it so important to Jesus?

2. It is important because it shows how infinitely dependent we are on God for everything.

Virtually all commentators and theologians believe that the Biblical images of fire and outer darkness are metaphorical. (Since souls are in hell right now, without bodies, how could the fire be literal, physical fire?) Even Jonathan Edwards pointed out that the Biblical language for hell was symbolic, but, he added, 'when metaphors are used in Scripture about spiritual things . . . they fall short of the literal truth.' (From "The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great" in volume 14 of the Yale edition of Edwards works.) To say that the Scriptural image of hell-fire is not wholly literal is of no comfort whatsoever. The reality will be far worse than the image. What, then, are the 'fire' and 'darkness' symbols for? They are vivid ways to describe what happens when we lose the presence of God. Darkness refers to the isolation, and fire to the disintegration of being separated from God. Away from the favor and face of God, we literally, horrifically, and endlessly fall apart.

In the teaching of Jesus the ultimate condemnation from the mouth of God is 'depart from me.' That is remarkable--to simply be away from God is the worst thing that can happen to us! Why? We were originally created to walk in God's immediate presence (Genesis 2.) In one sense, of course, God is everywhere and upholds everything. Only in him do we all speak and move and have our being (Acts 17:28.) In that sense, then, it is impossible to depart from the Lord; even hell cannot exist unless God

upholds it. But the Bible says sin excludes us from God's 'face' (Isaiah 59:2.) All the life, joy, love, strength, and meaning we have looked for and longed for is found in his face (Psalm 16:11)-that is, in his favor, presence, fellowship, and pleasure.

Sin removes us from that aspect of his power that sustains and supports us. It is to us as water is to a fish-away from it our life slowly ebbs away. That is what has been happening to us throughout history. That is why, for Paul, the everlasting fire and destruction of hell is 'exclusion from the presence of the Lord.' (2 Thessalonians 1:9.) Separation from God and his blessings forever is the reality to which all the symbols point. For example, when Jesus speaks being 'destroyed' in hell, the word used is *apollumi*, meaning not to be annihilated out of existence but to be 'totaled' and ruined so as to be useless for its intended purpose.

The image of 'Gehenna' and 'maggots' means decomposition. Once a body is dead it loses its beauty and strength and coherence, it begins to break into its constituent parts, to stink and to disintegrate. So what is a 'totaled' human soul? It does not cease to exist, but rather becomes completely incapable of all the things a human soul is for--reasoning, feeling, choosing, giving or receiving love or joy. Why? Because the human soul was built for worshipping and enjoying the true God, and all truly human life flows from that. In this world, all of humanity, even those who have turned away from God, still are supported by 'kindly providences' or 'common grace' (Acts 14:16-17; Psalm 104:10-30; James 1:17) keeping us still capable of wisdom, love, joy, and goodness. But when we lose God's supportive presence all together, the result is hell.

3. It is important because it unveils the seriousness and danger of living life for yourself.

In Romans 1-2 Paul explains that God, in his wrath against those who reject him, 'gives them up' to the sinful passions of their hearts. Commentators (cf. Douglas Moo) point out that this cannot mean God impels people to sin, since in Ephesians 4:19 it is said that sinners give themselves up to their sinful desires. It means that the worst (and fairest) punishment God can give a person is to allow them their sinful hearts' deepest desire.

What is that? The desire of the sinful human heart is for independence. We want to choose and go our own way (Isaiah 53:6.) This is no idle 'wandering from the path.' As Jeremiah puts it, 'No one repents . . . each pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle. (8:6)' (We want to get away from God-but, as we have seen, this is the very thing that is most destructive to us. Cain is warned not to sin because sin is slavery. (Genesis 4:7; John 8:34.) It destroys your ability to choose, love, enjoy. Sin also brings blindness-the more you reject the truth about God the more incapable you are of perceiving any truth about yourself or the world (Isaiah 29:9-10; Romans 1:21.)

What is hell, then? It is God actively giving us up to what we have freely chosen-to go our own way, be our own "the master of our fate, the captain of our soul," to get away from him and his control. It is God banishing us to regions we have desperately tried to get into all our lives. J.I.Packer writes: "*Scripture sees hell as self-chosen . . . Hell appears as God's gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually chose, either to be with God forever, worshipping him, or without God forever, worshipping themselves.*" (J.I.Packer, Concise Theology p.262-263.) If the thing you most want is to worship God in the beauty of his holiness, then that is what you will get (Ps 96:9-13.) If the thing you most want is to be your own master, then the holiness of God will become an agony, and the presence of God a terror you will flee forever (Rev 6:16; cf. Is 6:1-6.)

Why is this so extremely important to stress in our preaching and teaching today? The idea of hell is implausible to people because they see it as unfair that infinite punishment would be meted out for comparably minor, finite false steps (like not embracing Christianity.) Also, almost no one knows anyone (including themselves) that seem to be bad enough to merit hell. But the Biblical teaching on hell answers both of these objections. First, it tells us that people only get in the afterlife what they have

most wanted-either to have God as Savior and Master or to be their own Saviors and Masters. Secondly, it tells us that hell is a natural consequence. Even in this world it is clear that self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness makes you miserable and blind. The more self-centered, self-absorbed, self-pitying, and self-justifying people are, the more breakdowns occur, relationally, psychologically, and even physically. They also go deeper into denial about the source of their problems.

On the other hand, a soul that has decided to center its life on God and his glory moves toward increasing joy and wholeness. We can see both of these 'trajectories' even in this life. But if, as the Bible teaches, our souls will go on forever, then just imagine where these two kinds of souls will be in a billion years. Hell is simply one's freely chosen path going on forever. We wanted to get away from God, and God, in his infinite justice, sends us where we wanted to go.

In the parable of Luke 16:19ff, Jesus tells us of a rich man who goes to hell and who is now in torment and horrible thirst because of the fire (v.24) But there are interesting insights into what is going on in his soul. He urges Abraham to send a messenger to go and warn his still-living brothers about the reality of hell. Commentators have pointed out that this is not a gesture of compassion, but rather an effort at blame shifting. He is saying that he did not have a chance; he did not have adequate information to avoid hell. That is clearly his point, because Abraham says forcefully that people in this life have been well informed through the Scriptures. It is intriguing to find exactly what we would expect-even knowing he is in hell and knowing God has sent him there, he is deeply in denial, angry at God, unable to admit that it was a just decision, wishing he could be less miserable (v.24) but in no way willing to repent or seek the presence of God.

I believe one of the reasons the Bible tells us about hell is so it can act like 'smelling salts' about the true danger and seriousness of even minor sins. However, I've found that only stressing the symbols of hell (fire and darkness) in preaching rather than going into what the symbols refer to (eternal, spiritual decomposition) actually prevents modern people from finding hell a deterrent. Some years ago I remember a man who said that talk about the fires of hell simply didn't scare him, it seemed too far-fetched, even silly. So I read him lines from C.S. Lewis:

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others . . . but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

To my surprise he got very quiet and said, "Now that scares me to death." He almost immediately began to see that hell was a) perfectly fair and just, and b) something that he realized he might be headed for if he didn't change. If we really want skeptics and non-believers to be properly frightened by hell, we cannot simply repeat over and over that 'hell is a place of fire.' We must go deeper into the realities that the Biblical images represent. When we do so, we will find that even secular people can be affected.

We run from the presence of God and therefore God actively gives us up to our desire (Romans 1:24, 26.) Hell is therefore a prison in which the doors are first locked from the inside by us and therefore are locked from the outside by God (Luke 16:26.) Every indication is that those doors continue to stay forever barred from the inside. Though every knee and tongue in hell knows that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11,) no one can seek or want that Lordship without the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3.) This is why we can say that no one goes to hell who does not choose both to go and to stay there. What could be more fair than that?

4. The doctrine of hell is important because it is the only way to know how much Jesus loved us and how much he did for us. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says that no physical destruction can be compared with the spiritual destruction of hell, of losing the presence of God. But this is exactly what happened to Jesus on the cross—he was forsaken by the Father (Matthew 27:46.) In Luke 16:24 the rich man in hell is desperately thirsty (v.24) and on the cross Jesus said "I thirst" (John 19:28.) The water of life, the presence of God, was taken from him. The point is this. Unless we come to grips with this "terrible" doctrine, we will never even begin to understand the depths of what Jesus did for us on the cross. His body was being destroyed in the worst possible way, but that was a flea bite compared to what was happening to his soul. When he cried out that his God had forsaken him he was experiencing hell itself. But consider—if our debt for sin is so great that it is never paid off there, but our hell stretches on for eternity, then what are we to conclude from the fact that Jesus said the payment was "finished" (John 19:30) after only three hours? We learn that what he felt on the cross was far worse and deeper than all of our deserved hells put together.

And this makes emotional sense when we consider the relationship he lost. If a mild acquaintance denounces you and rejects you—that hurts. If a good friend does the same—that hurts far worse. However, if your spouse walks out on you saying, "I never want to see you again," that is far more devastating still. The longer, deeper, and more intimate the relationship, the more tortuous is any separation. But the Son's relationship with the Father was "beginningless" and infinitely greater than the most intimate and passionate human relationship. When Jesus was cut off from God he went into the deepest pit and most powerful furnace, beyond all imagining. He experienced the full wrath of the Father. And he did it voluntarily, for us.

Fairly often I meet people who say, "I have a personal relationship with a loving God, and yet I don't believe in Jesus Christ at all." Why, I ask? "My God is too loving to pour out infinite suffering on anyone for sin." But this shows a deep misunderstanding of both God and the cross. On the cross, God HIMSELF, incarnated as Jesus, took the punishment. He didn't visit it on a third party, however willing. So the question becomes: what did it cost your kind of god to love us and embrace us? What did he endure in order to receive us? Where did this god agonize, cry out, and where were his nails and thorns? The only answer is: "I don't think that was necessary." But then ironically, in our effort to make God more loving, we have made him less loving. His love, in the end, needed to take no action. It was sentimentality, not love at all. The worship of a god like this will be at most impersonal, cognitive, and ethical. There will be no joyful self-abandonment, no humble boldness, no constant sense of wonder. We could not sing to him "love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." Only through the cross could our separation from God be removed, and we will spend all eternity loving and praising God for what he has done (Rev 5:9-14.)

And if Jesus did not experience hell itself for us, then we ourselves are devalued. In Isaiah, we are told, "The results of his suffering he shall see, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:11). This is a stupendous thought. Jesus suffered infinitely more than any human soul in eternal hell, yet he looks at us and says, "It was worth it." What could make us feel more loved and valued than that? The Savior presented in the gospel waded through hell itself rather than lose us, and no other savior ever depicted has loved us at such a cost.

Conclusion The doctrine of hell is crucial—without it we can't understand our complete dependence on God, the character and danger of even the smallest sins, and the true scope of the costly love of Jesus. Nevertheless, it is possible to stress the doctrine of hell in unwise ways. Many, for fear of doctrinal compromise, want to put all the emphasis on God's active judgment, and none on the self-chosen character of hell. Ironically, as we have seen, this unBiblical imbalance often makes it less of a deterrent to non-believers rather than more of one. And some can preach hell in such a way that people reform

their lives only out of a self-interested fear of avoiding consequences, not out of love and loyalty to the one who embraced and experienced hell in our place. The distinction between those two motives is all-important. The first creates a moralist, the second a born-again believer.

We must come to grips with the fact that Jesus said more about hell than Daniel, Isaiah, Paul, John, Peter put together. Before we dismiss this, we have to realize we are saying to Jesus, the pre-eminent teacher of love and grace in history, "I am less barbaric than you, Jesus--I am more compassionate and wiser than you." Surely that should give us pause! Indeed, upon reflection, it is because of the doctrine of judgment and hell that Jesus' proclamations of grace and love are so astounding.

Lesson 5- Body Building

Ephesians 2:11-19

HOOK:

***Context:** There is a serious problem going on in the church of Ephesus. It's a problem that many churches still have. It's a problem that we as humans have. The problem is that one group in the church think that they are better than another group. The Jewish people who have converted to Christianity think that God loves them more than the Gentile believers who have no rich history as God's people. It seems that things are playing out in a way that is causing real tension and strife. But this is human nature right? If our real human effort is to feel validated, then we have to put others down in order to make ourselves feel to be in the right and thus superior. But Paul knows that though this is human nature, there is a solution. If Christ loves us each unconditionally the same. Then there is no trying to find identity that will satisfy us. The king of the universe has already given that identity. This is an incredibly informative section to Ephesians as it pulls back the curtains lets us see into the church just a bit.

Ask:

- What are there parallels to the Ephesian church today both in and outside the Church?

Read the Section: Ephesians 2:11-19

LOOK:

Unity in Christ- Ephesians 2:11-13

1. Ok, this gets a bit weird right off the bat. Sorry girls! What is your understanding of the significance of circumcision to the Jew?

It sounds archaic, but we need to understand the significance of circumcision in the Biblical times. It was very significant for a Jew, a special sign of God's connection to the Hebrew nation. In Genesis 15 we see the origination. It talks of circumcision as a sign given in a vision to Abram. He saw a smoking pot and burning flame pass between two bloody carcasses...what the heck? Well, in the ancient near east, when a covenant was made, the two parties would shed the blood of an animal and throw it to two sides. Then the two parties would walk through the middle together as if to say, "If either of us go back on the agreement, we are as good as dead like this animal". Abram saw a vision of God (smoke and fire is OT common allusion to God) walking through the pieces...note Abraham was not with God, but just observing. This was to say that God was establishing a covenant with Abraham but God needs no 2nd party. He is great enough on his own and will never turn back.

Back to circumcision... This was God's sign in light of the common historical tradition mentioned above. All people of the time period would have understand the extremely significant relevance of shedding flesh and blood in order to ratify a covenant. It was a treasured mark from that time on as a special agreement between God and the Jewish people signifying

his covenant of blessing with them. As a symbol, each male born to a Hebrew family got the special marking where blood was shed in order to remember the covenant God made with his very special people

2. But now, in the New Testament, Paul uses circumcision to depict a new covenant available for all people. Read: Romans 4:1-17. What do you see in this passage related to a new covenant and circumcision? What was the significance of when Abraham was justified? Why do we care when Abraham was justified?

Abraham was declared "righteous" before he was circumcised Paul tells us. (Vs. 10) If it was before circumcision, the outward sign of being in 'covenant' with God- circumcision is not what makes us righteous. Furthermore, now outward action or symbol makes us right with God. Not baptism, not worship, not giving up sins. Can you think of other outward signs that today we erroneously base our 'rightness' with God upon? In fact, Abraham was justified 400 years before the 'Law' was even given to Moses...therefore it is not the Law that justifies, but faith.

3. Imagine now with me. Why is this section about circumcision here?

If circumcision is not related to our justification, if it is just an outward sign of obedience, then the Jew has no special place to God just based on the physical act. There can be unity between Jews and Gentiles based on their common place before God because of Christ.

4. What is the application for us modern day people trying to follow God?

What are the things that divide us as believers? Where do they hinder each other's growth and witness? Stretch the context; what are things that divide non-Christians and us? What are the things that should divide and what are the things that we make too much of perhaps?

*5. I have a bit of a bonus question here. What is the connection between the OT and the NT in this passage? What is the significance that Paul quotes the OT often?

Paul quotes the Old Testament often. Jesus quoted from 24 of the Old Testament books. The use of the Old Testament in the New Testament validates and interprets the Old Testament for us. The Bible is not two different books talking about two different gods. It is one book talking about one God. The New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Jesus himself was Jewish. Paul was Jewish. Christianity is Jewish in origin. Everything that was talked about in the Old Testament aligns and coordinates with the New. There is a lot to be said here. One thing you must see as you read the Bible is that a growing understanding of the OT is paramount for a growing understanding of the NT and indeed the work that Christ did for us on the cross. (See 2:20)

The Mediator, Christ- Ephesians 2:14-18

1. Look at the different nouns in this section that have interactions with each other. Make a list. There are some double meanings that Paul employs. Try and find them.

*Christ is in here of course
The flesh
Dividing wall of hostility
The Law and Ordinances
One new man in the place of two
The Father. The cross. The Spirit
Strangers, aliens, citizens
Foundation of the apostles and prophets
Temple of the Lord- a dwelling place for God's people.*

The double meanings are really important here. There are interactions between Christ and all people here. There are also interactions between Jews and Gentiles. In the same phrase, Paul addresses the reality of what has happened between Christ and people as well as at the same time addressing the realities of what has happened between people. The reality of Christ's work affects the reality amongst people. Go to question #3 for more.

2. What does Christ do in this section?

Look at how this section focuses on the work of Christ. It is really beautiful and powerful if you spend some time thinking on it and letting it sink in. Look at Paul's attention on Christ. So too, unless we see how beautiful and wonderful Christ is, we will never respond to him adequately. Paul constantly leads us to the centrality of Christ for all that we are and do as Christians. Without Christ there is nothing for the Christian. If you want to grow, you have to ask the Lord to bring you face to face with the reality of Christ in your life. This whole letter is held together on the work of Christ and if you miss it, it will just become a 'live better and love others better' message. Spend time in this section on the wonder of Christ. Pray that you and your small group internalize his character.

3. What does it mean that He is our peace? Who are the groups he is talking about?

He is talking about Christ and all people but at the same time, Jews and Gentiles. College students, you need to get this one! I need to get this one. If Christ has done the greatest work ever upon the cross to bring us back into relationship with the God of the universe, there is finally rest! Don't we just want to sit down, breath deeply and know all is okay in life and the universe? We are all looking for peace deep down at the core of everything we do and desire. Yet you are not finding it. Even those of you that have trusted Christ for the payment of your sin aren't resting in peace. We are running frantic. We are trying to get good enough grades, get into the best schools, find the right person that will make us feel ok. But no matter how well we do, who we date, what job we get, peace is still lacking. I can hardly watch the news sometimes because there is no peace out there. I can't think too deeply about my life or I begin to get

anxious. But these desires are not wrong. They can't be. God created us for peace. The problem is that we are trying to find it in places it will not be found. We have made our circumstances the gauge of peace rather than the giver of peace Himself. When God completed his work of creation the 7th day never ended. When Jesus finished his work on the cross, he sat down. You and I are invited into the finished work of God. WE are ok, because he says we are ok. There is no greater voice in the universe than his and he calls us a valued child. Why do we run here and there? Why are we desperate for others' approval? You and I can rest. The peace of God is our fullest desire and he gives it freely and beautifully.

4. In this section, what is wonderful and beautiful about Christ to you?

5. Let's continue on the theme of the wonderful character of Jesus by looking at some of the similar characteristics of Christ in these passages? After you get an overview, what stands out?

John 1

Colossians 1

Hebrews 1

The body of Christ- Ephesians 2:19-22

1. Have you ever seen Christianity really work in creating love and unity amongst a group of people? How was it shown or lived out?

2. Have you seen it fail? Why do you think this was?

- Think about these questions: What are the greatest needs that people have?

Probably security, love, purpose, belonging. Would you add any?

- What keeps people from meeting each other's needs of security, love, purpose, belonging?

Well if those are all of our needs, who is going to be complete enough to meet another's needs? We are all so insecure, all searching for love, all searching for belonging. So as we strive to meet our own needs we are not freed up to love others in the way that God intended for us.

- Do you see evidences of these areas in the success or failures of the examples you mentioned above?
- How would a proper understanding at a heart level of the things Paul has brought up in Ephesians so far change the way people act towards others? Change the church? Specifically here in vs. 19-22?

**If we really understand all that Christ has done for us it would change the way that we are freed up to give out. If we come to terms that we are nothing w/o him, actually we are dead without him, then we would truly understand the grace that we have been given. The unconditional position we have as God's child would be life to us and we would therefore no longer be needy insecure people because the God of the universe calls us his beloved child! This would free us up to extend ourselves to others, to love in radical new vulnerable ways.*

*Extra discussion piece: Transformational communities **Acts 2:42-47**

Describe what is happening in this passage and how the teaching of Ephesians might have shaped such a situation.

3. How could you/your group be a part of restoring the 'body of Christ' practically? What is the motivation? What are the potential consequences if this generation does not? Let's be really specific too. What about cliques? Why do they exist and what about this teaching could help eradicate them?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

***Assignment:**

- Read 'Losing the Need to Pretend' (article following)
- Read 'You Can't Love Jesus and Hate His Wife (article following)
- Meditate on Christ's work for us in this passage

Suggested Reading: Seeing and Savoring Jesus, John Piper; Kingdom of Couches, Will Walker;
Changes that Heal, Henry Cloud

Losing the Need to Pretend

John Burke

If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves- 1 John 1:8 NLT - When my wife, Kathy, was in preschool she fell in love with a comic strip character, Zelda. Kathy wanted to be like Zelda. She wanted to do everything Zelda did. Then Kathy decided she was Zelda. Her teachers came to her mom concerned because Kathy would no longer answer to the name Kathy, she wanted to be called Zelda. We've all pretended to be someone we're not. It's fairly common for kids to pretend they are someone else. And it's acceptable if kids pretend because they are still forming their identities. But the goal is to learn to be yourself by the time you are an adult. Unfortunately, few adults seem to be comfortable enough with themselves not to pretend.

Our generation longs for something authentic. They are searching for "the real thing," though they don't really know what "the real thing" is. Because this generation has endured so much "me-ism" and letdown from those they were supposed to follow and trust, they want to see a genuine faith that works for less-than-perfect people before they are willing to trust. They want to know this God-thing is more than talk, talk, talk. They desperately want permission to be who they are with the hope of becoming more. They aren't willing to pretend, because hypocrisy repulses them. Most have yet to realize that every person is a hypocrite to some degree-the only question is whether we realize it and are honest about it.

It Starts with Authenticity

When we launched Gateway Community Church in 1998, the first service was entitled "Losing My Need to Pretend." Everything we did that morning contrasted the inauthentic ways of the religious leaders whom Jesus deemed hypocrites with an authentic spirituality of the heart. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were focused on religious rule-keeping. Jesus reserved his harshest words for these pretenders: "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone." (Luke 11:42 NIV) The religious leaders of Jesus' day were so focused on the traditions they had formed around the heart of God's message that they were neglecting the things most on God's heart.

That September morning in the delivery room of our new church, I told our newborn congregation that these stories are a warning against inauthentic, incongruent living. Jesus is basically saying, *Lose the religious pretense; it's destructive to authentic faith. Shed the mask of hypocrisy you hide behind. I want honest, authentic people-not hypocrites who pretend to be something they're not.* I asked the congregation a question at the end of the message: "Can we be this kind of a church? The kind where people don't have to pretend? Where we can be ourselves and stop pretending we're more or less than what we are right now? That's the only way we can help each other grow to be all God intended us to be. If we can't do this, we're just playing church!"

Authenticity is hard work. It always works from the inside out. It begins with the inner life of the leader, being authentic with God. It manifests itself in personal vulnerability before others as an intimate connection with God displaces the fear of transparency. This opens for others a view into an authentic spiritual life of a real human-not a religious salesperson. Finally, it becomes embedded in a culture so that authentic, growing communities of people can be formed and transformed.

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You Can't Love Jesus and Hate His Wife

Ed Stetzer

Get this. I'm standing in a reception line with my wife following a speaking engagement when this guy comes up to me and starts telling me how he's read all my books, has heard me speak on several occasions and told me how influential I've been to his ministry. (Please, go on!)

He talks about how he's introduced a number of his pastor friends to all things Stetzer and how they actually traveled across country to be at this event. Wow! But then, he starts verbally ripping on my wife like she's not even standing there. She's right there! He thinks my wife, who has been the love of my life and a partner in ministry for 25 years, is a drain on my ability to influence others. He says she's obsolete and that the "old girl is a little faded." I'm in shock.

Suddenly, the cheesy Christian motto of the 1990s flashes through my mind: *What would Jesus do?* Turn the other cheek? Pray for His enemy? Hand this guy His cloak? I'm about to go Jack Bauer on him. I think Jesus would have been ticked - like any normal husband would be. You see, the church is the Bride of Christ. And, you don't mess with a man's wife.

The story about my wife is made up. The reality of what professing believers of Christ do to and what they say about His bride - the church - is not. And it is exponentially more serious than saying my wife is "a little faded." (And I would take that pretty seriously!).

You cannot say you love Jesus and abuse His wife.

Unfortunately, there is a prevailing wind currently blowing across Western Evangelicalism that has caused an ecclesiological (church) drift into dangerous waters. Research stalwart George Barna documented the trend in a longitudinal study released in 2005. One alarming element of the study showed that 70 percent of respondents found their primary means of spiritual expression through the local church in 2000, but by 2025 he predicts those numbers to decrease by at least half. Did you get that? Now, I have some quibbles about the numbers and more about the theology. But, if Barna is right, in less than 20 years, only 30-35 people out of 100 will believe that the church holds a primary significance in their relationship with Christ. That's stunning for someone who loves the church (like I do).

We were surprised that in our recent research on young adult dropouts, the most common reasons young adults dropped out of church were lifestyle reasons. They got too busy, moved too far away, or experienced some other life change. And the church did not make the new list of priorities. Nice.

My question is how can anyone give even a cursory read of the New Testament and miss the supreme importance given to the church by the One who is most Supreme? Paul says that we were once "alienated and hostile in mind because of [our] evil actions. But now He has reconciled [us] by His physical body through His death, to present [us] holy, faultless and blameless before Him." Paul goes on to say that he rejoices in his suffering because his suffering is "completing in [his] flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for His body, that is, the church." (Colossians 1:21-24 HCSB) Paul was willing to take a beating for the church because Jesus submitted to a brutal murder "to make her (the church) holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless." (Ephesians 5:26-27 HCSB) Seems like fewer and fewer people are willing to take the church seriously, let alone take a beating for her. Just in these two key passages Paul teaches that Jesus - who clearly founded the church (Matthew 16:18) - suffered the physical brutality of God's righteous retribution against our spiritual rebellion in order to present an intentionally gathered people - His church - into His presence through His holiness. Can I get an "Amen"? (Cue the crickets.)

Today's collective church made up of thousands of local churches is so distracted by anger at each other: emerging churches are mad at mega-churches; contemporary churches are mad at

traditional churches; Arminian churches are mad Calvinistic churches; *et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*. There are of course exceptions and I'm making an overarching statement that unfortunately is becoming truer by the day. On a daily basis, we witness the attack blogs where we can attack other churches like the pajamahadeen: sitting in pajamas, not reaching anyone, but being an expert on how everyone else is wrong.

And, let me say here, I have some concerns about how some churches operate - but I have tried to focus on how to help and not how to destroy. Is it any wonder that Barna identifies a dramatic increase in alternative faith communities in his study? Alarming there is a significant group of men and women leaving the church but holding to a form of Christian devotion. Wrong answer! But, I think Barna is right about the reasons why - people have tired of the frequently lifeless gatherings we call churches. Okay, those of you whose resting pulse rate just shot to 140 over that last statement, go to the kitchen, open the drawer, and pull out a brown paper sack. Now breathe into it, taking long slow breaths. Before you hit "send" on that e-mail, stay with me here because it is not a secular culture that is tarnishing the image of the church. Look back in your Bible. "The forces of Hades will not stand against it." (Matthew 16:18 HCSB) If the best that hell has can't deliver a crushing blow, secular culture is small time in comparison.

But here's the deal. Christians - not humanists - are rendering the church powerless by cutting the heart out of the gospel's transformative power. We (Christians) say by our actions that the work of Christ is not sufficient to heal infidelity, unhealthy dependencies, depression, relationships, and everything else that reveals there is little moral distinction between those in the church and our secular counterparts outside of church. Or, we neuter the gospel by being so orthodox in doctrine that in our piety we conveniently stuff the book of James through a paper shredder. James Emery White writes in his book, *Serious Times*, that "Christ followers are notorious for being dismissive of the church, as if it were a disposable institution created by human beings..."¹ How do we right the severely listing - remember it was already drifting - ship we're sailing? Quickly, the sky is falling. What's the answer? What's the answer?

Church. (Duh!) Dig out those Bibles again and camp in Ephesians for a while. Root through chapter three. Paul says that the multi-faceted wisdom of God may now be made known *through the church*. What's included in that multi-faceted wisdom? "The incalculable riches of the Messiah, and [the shedding of] light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." (HCSB)

Isn't it ironic that the very remedy for our sinking, drifting Christianity is found in the very institution we are walking away from, weakening and marginalizing? We have the institution through which the Risen Christ plans to capture the hearts of rebellious men yet we scamper here and there after some wispy spiritual experience. Amazing. White also says *We do not live and breathe in a neutral environment but in the midst of a hostile conflict, and we are behind enemy lines. The god of this world has been named, and he is ensconced firmly on his throne. There is only one domain beyond his control that stands in the way of total dominion: the body of Christ. As a result, the church is under constant assault, for it stands alone against the night. It demands constant reinforcement and steadfast commitment. The church is not simply the vanguard of kingdom advance; it is the entire assault force. According to Jesus' words, the church is not only to take a stand against evil but also to stage a frontal attack.*²

Now, let me say that the church is not the center of God's plan. Jesus is. But, the church is central to God's plan. Jesus places the church in a position of great importance. Now, it does not matter if a church meets in a cathedral or a coffee shop, but the church does matter. (If this is still fuzzy, start in Matthew, read through Revelation and repeat as many times as necessary until cured of deficient ecclesiology.) But hey, I'm more than just a prophet of doom. We all have to figure out how to love a

church, a Bride, that everyone agrees needs a little work. Let me make a few suggestions on how we can be a better bride.

First, let's drop the focus on personal transformation and clue in to Gospel transformation. You can "be a better you" all you want to, it doesn't get you any closer to being more Christ-like. If preaching is going to pierce complacency; if we are going to grow in holiness; if churches are going to positively impact culture, it will come through the gospel of Jesus. Remember that He said "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32 HCSB) and Paul said he preached "Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23), the power and wisdom of God. Make it your goal to help the people in your local congregation/gathering/whatever be transformed by the Gospel.

Next, and closely related, is making the destination of sermons and conversations the Gospel. It is good to be practical, but five steps to a healthier financial situation are worthless if our finances are not brought under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The vision for your church; is it practical? Great. But, does it point to the lordship of Jesus Christ? Ensure that the discipleship and spiritual formation of people guides them to submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ and not just being better people. Oprah and Dr. Phil can do the latter; only the Gospel can do the former.

Third, shake loose of the hero complex. If you need help, here's a hint: there's only one God and you ain't Him. If you think you're special, better stop and evaluate which kingdom's construction site you're working.

Finally, focus on the cross. Remember all that the church is prepared to be - "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless" - was bought on the cross. That's the fulcrum of redemptive history. Lose the cross and you will soil the bride.

If you claim to be a disciple of Jesus, then love his wife. Don't be guilty of going to great lengths to show your love for Christ while ignoring, marginalizing, or attacking the Bride.

Ed Stetzer is Director of [LifeWay Research](http://www.edstetzer.com/). He is dialoguing about this article at <http://www.edstetzer.com/>.

1. White, James Emery. 2004. *Serious Times: Making your life matter in an urgent day*. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, p. 135.

2. Ibid.

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Lesson 6– A New Purpose

Ephesians 3:1-13

HOOK:

***Context:** Paul has been called to a special role in the body of Christ. In chapter 3 he tells us a little bit about that purpose in clear detail. On the road to Damascus, where he had a revelation from Jesus, God revealed himself to Paul and called him in a powerful way to ministry. He was given a radical new ministry to take the gospel to the Gentiles. It was once thought that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob only called Jewish people to himself. Now, with Paul's revelation, the Gentiles are specifically included too. That is good news for most of you reading as any "non-Jew" is a Gentile and you non-Jews are receiving the blessing of Paul's revelation even today. Today we will look at Paul's purpose and motivation and ask what should be true of those of us following in his footsteps as well.

Ask:

- At this point in your life, WHO has shaped the purpose of your life the most?
- At this point in your life, WHAT or what event, time period has shaped the purpose of your life the most?
- Would you say that you are living purposefully or that you truly know what your personal purpose in life is?

Read the Section: Ephesians 3:1-13

LOOK:

Paul's Calling- Ephesians 3:1-6

1. Whenever you see, "for this reason" or "therefore" or "so then", you must ask, "for what reason?", "what's the therefore therefore?" etc. Paul is a master of building a theological motivation and then transitioning with a "therefore", or "for this reason" etc. Such is the case here. For what reason?

In this case, it seems that Paul is referring to the theology he has developed in vs. 11-22 directly before 3:1. Because Jesus has divided the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, Paul has been made a minister to the Gentiles.

2. Why was Paul specifically well suited to be a minister to the Gentiles with a faith based in Jewish roots? (Hint: why was Paul called "Saul" originally but changed his name to "Paul"?)

"Saul" is a Hebrew name. He was a Jew by birth and thus had a Jewish name. However, Saul was born in the town of Tarsus. Tarsus was a Roman colony whereby everyone born in Tarsus was given Roman citizenship. It would kind of be like growing up in a foreign country with sovereign United States ownership. By virtue of living in a U.S. colony, you would be given U.S. citizenship, even though you were not American. Such was the case for "Saul/Paul". When he

came to faith in Christ and began a ministry to the Gentiles, he took the Greek name, Paul. So, he was a Jew with Roman "gentile" citizenship and a Greek/Gentile name. This was very unique but also powerful. He could bridge a gap between two culturally distinct people.

3. Is there a place where you are specifically well suited to minister given your background?

4. What is Paul's purpose according to this passage vs. 1-13?

To live a prisoner, steward God's grace, a minister of the gospel, preach to the gentiles, bring light to God's plan, be a part of the church bringing God to bear on the world, suffering

Paul's motivation- Ephesians 3:7-13

1. Motivation is all-important. You can do the same action, but depending on the motivation, it can be obedient to God, or self-centered disobedience to God. What are the things that cause Paul to have the purpose he did?

(Use this passage to begin but you may want to broaden the search to other scripture the group knows as well. Are their specific motivations that should be transferable to us?)

- 1. Gentiles who do not know the message of the Gospel. (vs. 1,6)*
- 2. He has heard from God! (vs. 3, 5)*
- 3. Response to God's grace (vs. 7)*
- 4. Humility of his own position before God (vs. 8)*
- 5. The riches of Christ are so great! (vs. 8)*
- 6. The church would arise and make Christ known (vs. 10)*
- 7. It is the purpose of Jesus, he should follow (vs. 11)*
- 8. For the glory of the church in Ephesus (vs. 13)*

2. Let's broaden the question to one that is perhaps the deepest question ever asked! What is the purpose of humans? Why has God put us, you here on earth?

We are a culture living in a vacuum of purpose...we are an aimless generation. Today people are known for what they consume, not what they produce or what purpose they serve. We are a culture asking 'who am I and what am I here for'? Not long ago, Pastor Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Life" soared on the NY Times best-seller list. Honestly I thought it was a pretty rudimentary book. But it touched a longing in the hearts of American's to find some sort of transcendent ideal to shoot for. God has given us each a tremendously valuable and honorable purpose. Each of us should be asking...."what is God's purpose for me?", especially during college.

But there are also general purposes that are true for each of us. Some of the general purposes might be to Glorify God, to make Christ known, to be a part of building His Kingdom,

to love other people. What can you come up with? The rest of the study will continue to help highlight living purposefully and the motivations from which a purposeful life come.

3. This is a hard question to evaluate, but how much of your life is lived purposefully? Considering the purpose that your life does display currently, how much is done out of a response to Christ and how much is done out of your own sense of personal fulfillment? How do we balance these seemingly competing motivations?

***Notebooks:** For consideration: What will be different in this world because of you when you die? How about when you graduate...what or who will be different?

*Exercise: Write out an epitaph of what you would want to have said about you when you die. I know, a bit morbid. But isn't it true that we tend to think 2 months ahead, two years ahead, maybe 10 years. But how about 50 years? Small changes now can result in huge impact that far down the road. So start it like this: (Here lies Joe who.....)

*String Example

(Bring a role of string, ask one member to hold the end, take the role and go around the room and finally out the door down the hall etc. (Not literally probably). Take a black marker and make a dot on the string. This is your 80 years on earth in light of infinite eternal life (the length of the string). What will you do in this life that will matter for eternity? What could your group do this year that would matter for the length of the string?)

*"Then what?" questions

Why are you here at school?

Why do you want an education?

Why do you want a job?

Why do you want to provide for a family?

Why....etc?

In essence, why? Why are you living, what is the end goal, will it matter after you die that you have lived for that purpose?

(These questions are meant to help bring you to the reality of your purpose in life, your ultimate motivations. What are you really living for? We tend to go on with life according to cultural norms, but do we ever take stock, what am I really living day to day for?)

4. Read **John 17:1-5**- What was Jesus' motivation on earth?

It was something to do with 'glorifying' his father, pointing towards Him as the ultimate, the most beautiful, the most satisfying, the most worthy, the most holy...on and on! Jonathan Edwards points out that in glorifying God, we are not really adding anything to Him. He does not need anything. He is already totally complete. But it is helpful for me to understand Edwards' perspective when he says that glorifying God is to cause God's radiance to go further

and have more influence. It is like removing a shade from a lamp. The bulb does not suddenly glow brighter, but the emanation is more radiant, more extensive, and more glorious!

- If we know Jesus' motivation, shouldn't we seek to train ours to be the same? What causes or could cause our motivation to be more like Jesus'?

5. Here are some more motivation passages:

- Read Luke 15:1-10
- Read Revelation 21
- Read Matthew 9:35-38
- Genesis 1:26-28

- What is God's heart for people in these passages?

One of Paul's driving purposes... and Jesus' was to make the name of God known to the world. In fact that was the design for humanity from the very beginning. (Genesis 1:26-28) Then why are we all scared to share the message that Paul so boldly proclaimed? Perhaps we have not experienced the reality of what we have to offer. Perhaps we have not experienced the freedom and joy of being set free from the bondage chain? The truth is that we have the answer to life's disease. If your friend discovered the cure to cancer and you had leukemia, can you imagine the exasperation you would feel upon finding out that he did not share the information with you? To truly live a life of purpose, we need to ask that God sink this head knowledge to our heart and then cause us to respond appropriately to all that He is and all that He has done. Often that means living for things that matter for eternity and often starts with the person right next to you.

6. Here are a few more:

- Micah 6:8
- Luke 4:18
- Deuteronomy 15:7-11
- James 1:27

- What is God's heart for people in these passages?

**God cares about what He has created. Part of that concern is for the well-being, not just of the spiritual lives of people, but also for the Physical. Look at Jesus' model as He ministered to people. He cared about the whole person, not just that they would 'invite them into their hearts'. Our hearts have to change to be more in line with God's hearts for the nations. We have ignored a calling to care about the sick, the poor, the underprivileged in our world for too long. Why is it that Christians are known for what they are against more than they are known for what they are for? If I walk up to a person on campus and ask them if they want to be a Christian, the stereotypical response is 'I don't want to be a person who hates homosexuals, doesn't care about the environment, is hypocritical and is lazy. We have not cared about the things that God cares about for too long. We have removed ourselves to suburban mega-buildings to live with others of our same class and beliefs and forgot about the world in which Christ immersed Himself. How is Christ calling you as a group to care about justice and mercy in*

our world? The tension is that we mustn't forget that people's real need is the spoken message of Jesus, but they will not hear it unless they see it working.

Mostly, Jesus got a hearing from his contemporaries because of what he was doing. They saw him saving people from sickness and death, and they heard him talking about a salvation, the message for which they had longed, that would go beyond the immediate into the ultimate future. But the two were not unrelated, the present one a mere visual aid of the future one or a trick to gain people's attention. The whole point of what Jesus was up to was that he was doing, close up, in the present, what he was promising long-term, in the future. And what he was promising for that future, and doing in that present, was not saving souls for a disembodied eternity but rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way the world presently is so they could enjoy, already in the present, that renewal of creation which is God's ultimate purpose- and so they could thus become colleagues and partners in that larger project....

.....What I am saying is, think through the hope that is ours in the gospel; recognize the renewal of creation as both the goal of all things in Christ and the achievement that has already been accomplished in the resurrection; and go to the work of justice, beauty, evangelism, the renewal of space, time, and matter as the anticipation of the eventual goal and the implementation of what Jesus achieved in his death and resurrection. That is the way both to the genuine mission of God and to the shaping of the church by and for that mission.

All of this means, of course, that the people who work at and for this mission in the wider world must themselves be living, modeling and experiencing the same thing in their own lives. There is ultimately no justification for the private piety that doesn't work out in actual mission, just as there is ultimately no justification for people who use their activism in the social cultural or political sphere as a screen to prevent them from facing the same challenges within their own lives- the challenge, that is, of God's kingdom, of Jesus' lordship, and of the Spirit's empowering. **If the gospel isn't transforming you, how do you know that it will transform anything else?** "Surprised by Hope" pg. 192,270 N.T. Wright

7. How could your group be a part of bringing God's gospel of justice and mercy to your campus?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

Assignment:

- Read 'Justice Para Yuri! (article following)
- Read 'Mission Impossible' (article following)
- Make a "Top Five List" (friends that you will pray for to know Christ). Think of a plan to talk to these five people and begin praying for them.
- Plan a project for the group to join together to put God's justice and mercy in action.
- Find the central theme of Ephesians 1-3.
- Outline these chapters.

Suggested Reading: Radical Reformation, Mark Driscoll; The Gospel and Personal Evangelism, Mark Dever; Finding Common Ground, Tim Downs

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The plot of history and the drama of today

by Rick James

Apart from Christ, life is without context. By “context,” I mean a story line that gives meaning to life and significance to our actions. As no one likes being in a story without a plot, the secular world is constantly generating plausible story lines to imprint some kind of meaning upon our existence. Think, for example, of the children’s movie *The Lion King*. How do we make sense of all of the living, dying, and suffering in the world? Answer: we are part of “the circle of life.” You’re not just roadkill; you’re a meal for something further up the food chain, so . . . cheer up, I guess. As all such invented story lines are but painted backdrops for the stage of life, you don’t want to look too closely at the frail conceptual framework that props them up. They’re just catchy soundtracks, something to whistle when the lights go out.

Here’s another popular story line: what gives ultimate meaning to our life is to be remembered, living on in the hearts and minds of others. So forget your wallet, forget your car keys, but for the love of God, remember the 300 (Frank Miller’s *300*). Or remember the T-800. Or remember the Alamo. Or remember the Holocaust. Or remember, remember the fifth of November (*V for Vendetta*). You’d better remember—if you forget, we’re dead.

You can go to a Borders or a Blockbuster and find dozens of these invented contexts or story lines that—in a random universe—provide meaning to our lives and purpose to our existence. It’s as if

Satan, fearing the loss of his audience, went out and hired J. J. Abrams (*Lost*, *Alias*) or M. Night Shyamalan to generate plausible story lines for a life without God.

But, as Christians, that’s not our problem. Not anymore. Our salvation brought with it spiritual riches beyond measure, not the least of which is a sense of purpose and meaning. Because we know God, we have answers to our deepest existential questions: who and what we are; how we got here; why we exist; why people suffer; where we’re going when we die . . . and the list goes on.

In Search of a Plot

Well, almost all questions. While our relationship with God gives context to everything and answers any number of anger-ridden questions, it doesn’t necessarily answer the question “What should I do on Monday morning—or for the rest of my life for that matter?” I mean, sure, every day we can get up and love God and neighbors in any number of ways. But while that is meaningful, it’s more of a purpose to life than a plot. Christian lives always have a purpose (to glorify God, in case you forgot) but not necessarily a plot.

This point couldn’t be more important, so let me explain what I mean. Let’s start with the definition of *plot* so we can distinguish it from *purpose*. The dictionary defines *plot* as “a series of causally related events, involving some sort of conflict or tension, leading to a climax and a resolution.”

What, for example, was the purpose of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*? It’s clearly defined in the last book: the purpose is that, having come to love Aslan in Narnia, the reader might come to love Christ in the real world. That’s the purpose of the story, but it’s not the plot or story line. Is it? While one could get confused with all the talking badgers and other critters, the story line goes something like: there is a struggle between good and evil going on for control of Narnia and the fate of its inhabitants. See, that’s worth a \$28 bag of popcorn. That’s a story line complete with protagonists, antagonists, tension, conflict, and resolution—the elements that always revolve around the nucleus of plot.

Or let’s imagine a new show we’ll call *Christians LOST*. A plane crashes and strands a group of Christians on a mysterious island. The purpose of the Christians on the island is the same as for Christians everywhere: to glorify God. To serve others to the glory of God, cook food to the glory of God, encourage one another to the glory of God, turn coconuts into dinnerware to the glory of God, and so on, ad infinitum. It’s a purposeful little community but as boring to watch as *Telenovelas*, and that’s because there’s no plot. But what if I add this to the story: the castaways must struggle to find a way off the island while malevolent forces try to thwart their efforts and annihilate the community? See, now we have tension, conflict—plot.

The point is this: Christians by and large mistake purpose for plot. We were created to glorify God, to love and serve him in everything we do. But there is a plot to the Christian life, not just a purpose, and it is not until we understand that plot, and the broader story line of history, that we truly have a context for our life on this plane.

So, what is the plot? The plot of the Christian life, as it so happens, is identical to the plot or story line of Scripture. And that plot is the expansion of the kingdom of God in this world and the proclamation of his king, over and against the powers of evil that oppose the purposes, plans, and reign of God.

It’s true that every life is a story; it’s just not true that every story (life) is interesting—or even worth reading for that matter. And that holds true for Christian lives as well. But when we embrace the biblical plot, our lives also take on plot. As soon as we seek to expand God’s kingdom, we experience the opposition of Satan (the antagonists), persecution and conflict, created tensions, victories and failures, climaxing action and resolution, and through the intensity of the struggle, character development (the other hallmark of a good story). Our lives become a darn good story; the book

jacket littered with superlatives: “pulse-pounding action”; “90-naph thrill ride”; “pure adrenaline.”

And as one day you and I will need to give an account of our stories (our lives) to the Lord, we would be wise to give due attention to the development of this plot.

Now as I said, the plot, or story line, of the Christian life is one and the same as the plot of the Bible. So what we want to do is trace that plot as it is introduced in Genesis and develops over the pages of the Old and New Testaments. This is a critical exercise, because at some point you and I are called to jump into the story ourselves and play a role in bringing it to its climax and resolution.

The Genesis of Genesis

In most books the opening pages introduce us to the plot, and in this sense—though it feels heretical to say it—the Bible is like any other book. In fact, almost everything we need to know about the plot of the Bible is found in the first chapters of Genesis. Through the account of Adam and Eve, we learn that humankind was a unique creation bearing the stamp of God’s image like Roosevelt on a dime. As such, we were to be *his* representatives administering his kingdom in this world, whatever that might have looked like prior to the Fall of Man. But fall we did.

As the drama reveals, being made in God’s image carried with it an unusual capacity: the human creation, among other things, came off the assembly line with the option of free will. But this capacity came bundled with a liability, namely the possibility to sin, to make the alternate choice. And so the stage is set and now all our story needs is an antagonist, and sure enough he slithers in on cue.

What we know of Satan in Scripture is all that God wants us to know, and it’s not a whole heck of a lot. Apparently, all we need to know is that there is a spiritual dimension apart from the physical and it includes spiritual beings who possess intelligence and independence of will. Though a different order of creation, they are not unlike us, and where there’s a will, there’s always a way for rebellion. The result of which has been a cosmic struggle in the spiritual order, a struggle that bleeds through into the physical universe as seen in the lives of Adam and Eve and billions of other people since then.

But all things being equal, all things are not equal. There is not a “balance in the force,” or equity between good and evil, just an almighty Yin and finite, smoldering little Yangs. God alone is all wise, all powerful, and all knowing; God is Creator and

part of his creation is an order of spiritual beings, some benevolent (angels), some no longer so (Satan and demonic forces). That these evil forces are able to persist in their rebellion against God is not a reflection of their power but of God's ultimate purposes in allowing them to do so.

What ultimate purposes might there be? I'm sure there are many, some knowable and some not. One purpose we witness in Genesis is for spiritual evil to play a role as antagonist in the human story. God's infinite intelligence means that second-guessing the author would be foolish, but Adam and Eve up and did it anyway.

Yet even as Adam and Eve failed and fell, God immediately intervened to preserve his plan and expand his kingdom, regardless of how costly the salvage operations might be.

Salvage Operations

Although God's kingdom could not be effectively governed through Adam and Eve, hope sprang up through a godly son named Abel. But hope didn't live long. In fact, hope was brutally murdered out in a field by his brother Cain, and now another dress piece is yanked from the board, with the pawns of evil multiplying.

By merely the sixth page of Genesis, we encounter this evaluation of humankind, sounding much like a eulogy: "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain" (Genesis 6:5-6).

Sin had spread through the body of humanity, and the only hope was an emergency operation: find a gland, organ, or appendage where the cancer had not

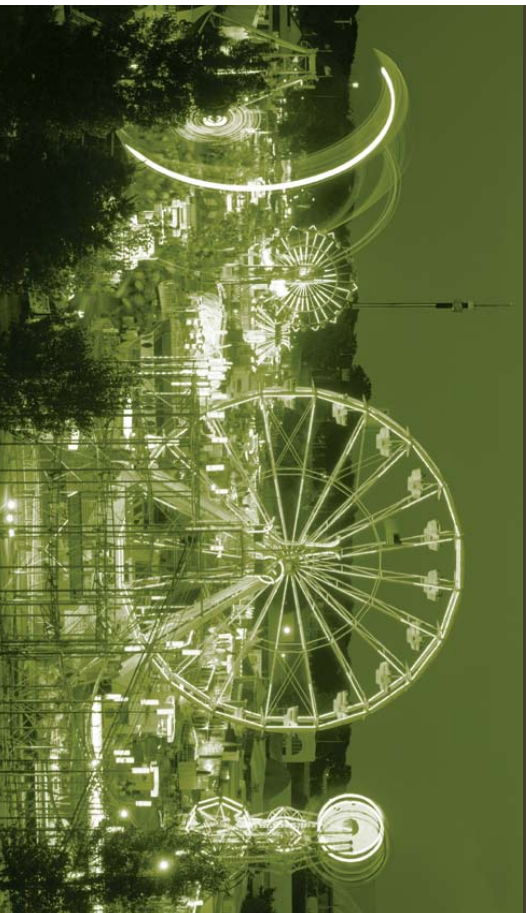
fully spread and amputate the cancerous remains. And so a righteous man was found by the name of Noah. He and his family were preserved from the flood of judgment—godly seed artificially inseminated into a new postdiluvian world.

But while the immediate threat of evil was drowned in the deluge, sin persisted and proliferated. The spiritual arms race wasn't over, not by a long shot. In Genesis 11 we see that sin once again coalesced, this time in the city of Babel, where the human race rallied around a great tower to make a run at heaven. God's assessment of the danger to the expansion of his kingdom was as follows: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (11:6). So God splintered the human language at the city of Babel, and while sin could and would continue to spread, this meretricious intervention diluted its potency.

In these opening chapters of Genesis the plot and action come at us like the opening sequence of a James Bond movie, and it's about to settle down to the pace of life. The plot, if you missed it, is that God is seeking to establish his kingdom and reign within his creation, this world. The enemy at first was Satan and the dark spiritual forces, but these were quickly joined by the vast majority of humanity who find greater pleasure in sin and rebellion than in serving and loving God. However, as we see in Genesis 12, God was going to unveil a new means by which to establish and spread his kingdom on earth, an experiment that would occupy the rest of the Old Testament.

Israel

If you locate Israel on a map, you'll notice something significant: it is the shared border of two obese landmasses (Africa and



Eurasia). This is no accident. God wanted Israel to be "a city on a hill" (Matthew 5:14), the only tourist attraction on the only rumple between the continents. He wanted people from everywhere in the known world to pass through and see the Magic Kingdom, where God's reign and rule were on display. Israel was God's missionary outreach to the world, the base of operations from which to expand his kingdom to the world.

Consider the genius of the plan. After the tower of Babel, the world had been tribalized: hundreds of little nation-states comprised of clans and families, each in a state of rebellion, autonomous of God. No longer would a single man, woman, or family provide a sufficient witness. What was needed was a lighthouse, not a light, a beacon with sufficient wattage to illuminate the distant, ever-spawning nations. What was needed was a nation, a godly superpower to draw all nations back to God.

It's just a shame that no such nation existed. The nations

spawned in the judgment of Babel were darkened and degenerate, providing as much light as a flashlight powered by a AAA battery. So God would bake a nation from scratch, using a righteous man named Abram as dough (the name Abraham means "exalted father" and would later be changed to Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude"). It is not incidental that the first citizens of this new nation—Abraham and his wife, Sarah—were roughly seventy years of age, for the birth of their offspring, like the birth of the nation, would be a God-created miracle: life out of death.

In Genesis 12 we read how God told Abram to leave his home in Babylon and go to Canaan so that in due time he and his descendants would become a nation serving as a lighthouse to the world, calling all people and nations back to God. Israel was to be a gospel tract plunked down in the center of the world coffee table. Here are the specific instructions and promise that Abraham received from God.

The plot is that God is seeking to establish his kingdom and reign within his creation, this world.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; and I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Please note the goal of the plan put forth in Genesis 12:1-3, the reason for which God created the nation of Israel. It was so that all peoples on earth would be blessed through them and come to know the one true God. They were blessed in order to be a blessing, in order to expand God's kingdom to the world.

Thus God's dealings with Israel in the centuries that followed, and in the following thirty-eight books of the Old Testament, all in some way related to the development of this plot and story line. Let me just pull some verses as we flip through the Old Testament on our way to the New, so you can track the arc of the story.

Keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 28:9-10)

The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God. (Joshua 4:23-24)

Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. (1 Samuel 17:46)

Do whatever the forefinger asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel. (1 Kings 8:43)

Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God. (2 Kings 19:19)

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. (Psalm 67:1-2)

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

"If you will return, O Israel, return to me," declares the LORD, "and no longer go astray, and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives,' then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory." (Jeremiah 4:1-2)

All in all, the plan was a spectacular one: Israel's performance in the lead role, less so. Like some of the God-wants-to-bless-you-with-a-fleet-of-Humvees religious broadcasting we see on television, Israel's portrayal of life in the kingdom was a distortion and often a mockery of that reality. They fell into idolatry, worshipping the gods of other nations; they failed to trust God through their national and international crises; corruption reigned at all levels of political and religious governance; and their spiritual life was rife with legalism and hypocrisy.

Needless to say, none of this makes for a particularly enticing advertisement for God's kingdom—just another ugly billboard on the thruway between Africa and Eurasia. In this respect you'd have to say that Disneyworld has done

a better job of drawing all nations to a bright and shining vision of a new social order.

Jonah

Of all the books of the Old Testament, Jonah provides the clearest, most unobscured view of the internal writing responsible for Israel's failure to generate light to the nations.

From history, we know that Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, stretched the definition of decadence to the world's limits. From the book of Jonah, we know that God mercifully sought to warn the great city of its impending judgment. And so God called a prophet from Israel, one named Jonah, to go to Nineveh with this cheery telegram: repent or perish. Upon receiving his mission, Jonah promptly booked a voyage on a boat heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh—Jonah was on strike. God persuasively convinced Jonah of the imprudence of his decision, and Jonah reluctantly headed off to preach to Nineveh. . . . just as soon as the whale vomited him back up. At the hearing of Jonah's warning, a miracle happened: Nineveh repented—the entire city!

It was one of the greatest evangelistic campaigns in history. And here we witness Jonah's celebration of the event:

Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:1-3)

Jonah was not happy; not happy at all. Now for my point: Jonah is a picture of Israel. What Israel wanted was for God to level the city of Nineveh, reduce it to a Stonehenge condition and annihilate its ungodly citizens.

The Israelites had succumbed to nationalism. They presumed that their favored status as a nation was because of their righteousness. It wasn't. Their blessing by God had been unmerited and for the purpose of blessing other nations. Instead, an us-versus-them mindset fueled national pride, prejudice smoldered as they bunkered down waiting, paying for an air strike from heaven—kill 'em, kill 'em all.

Israel, ceasing to be a channel of God's grace, was now a roadblock to the mission and a spoiler of the plot. They were the recipients of God's blessings, unwilling to share it. There are many precarious positions to find oneself in as a nation, but being a hindrance to God's kingdom is not a desirable state of affairs, putting you at the top of God's list of "things that need replacing."

But we get ahead of ourselves. Maybe when the Messiah came, Israel would respond and through them all the nations of the world would hear the glorious gospel of the kingdom. Maybe they would embrace the plot. Yeah, maybe.

The Manhattan Project

In the struggle, both cosmic and terrestrial, we've seen quite the arsenal employed by God to impede the spread of evil and expand his kingdom and reign on earth. But the dropping of a Messiah on the unsuspecting town of Bethlehem redefined all rules of engagement.

During his roughly three and half years of public ministry, Jesus would call the nation of Israel to repent and embrace her King and his coming kingdom. But

it was only a minority, a godly remnant, who would turn, cursy, and follow. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that as he headed toward Jerusalem and his appointed death, Jesus' parables turned dark and ominous, seemingly rumbling from his lips. Try this one on for size.

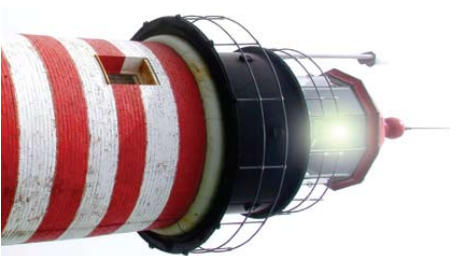
A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready."

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me."

Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me."

Still another said, "I just got married, so I can't come."

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then





the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."

"Sir," the servant said, "what you ordered has been done, but there is still room."

Then the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet," (Luke 14:16-24)

This parable of the great banquet is, in effect, an eviction notice from Israel's landlord. If Israel would not repent and receive her Messiah, then the kingdom would expand all right, but not through them. The message of the King and his kingdom would bypass Israel, and invitations would

instead be sent to the Gentile nations (or "out to the roads and country lanes" as referenced in the parable), where it would find a willing audience.

The messianic banquet is a powerful eschatological (end of the age) image deeply rooted in the Old Testament. It would have been a shock (though it shouldn't have been) for Israel to learn that the Gentiles were to be seated at the banquet, but it was incomprehensible that they themselves would be scratched from the guest list.

Yet having provided a personal visitation, what more could God possibly do to reform the wayward nation? Nothing. As Jews got to the final days of his ministry on earth, hope for Israel as the conduit of blessing to the nations had all but expired. No more pleas, no more parables, no more free loaves or lunches just a last symbolic gesture, an enactment of Israel's impending judgment and rejection.

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written:

"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?"

But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mark 11:12-17)

In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" (Mark 11:20,21)

Jesus looked to the fig tree (a fig tree being symbolic of Israel in the Old Testament) and saw that fruit was nowhere to be found. Likewise, as he entered the temple, the center of Israel's worship, it too was devoid of produce (spiritual fruit). God had required the Jews to build a special section onto the temple, called the Court of the Gentiles, for those of other nations to come and "know the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:34). Like Israel as a whole, the temple—Jesus reminded his listeners—was to be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17). But instead of the court serving its evangelistic function, it had been turned into Walmart and with such an attitude toward missions, the lack of fruit was anything but a mystery.

The verdict had been rendered. In proclaiming God's glory to the nations, Israel was as superfluous as a fig tree without figs. It would need to be abandoned. The gospel would be preached to the nations, but through a new vehicle—the followers of Jesus, the church, a new Israel. (As could be argued from Romans 11, this does not preclude the possibility that God may one day revisit his covenant with ethnic Israel.)

God's people were to expand his kingdom to the world, proclaiming its king to every nation.

The Great Commission

After his death and resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples this final instruction, and as they were his last words and last command to his followers, it is more than a little significant: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

See, if you were one of the first disciples, you might have been wondering, *What will happen now that the Messiah has come? Now that Israel has rejected him? Now that God has rejected Israel?* In other words, you might be wondering what was to become of the plot without Israel. Jesus, in his final words, addressed that question and affirmed to his followers that the plot of history—and Scripture—remained the same.

As I've stated with considerable redundancy, the Bible, while containing many themes, is driven by a single plot. With that in mind, it is important to read the final words of the Old Testament as if they are the closing words of a very large book—because they are. In the Hebrew Scriptures (which of course were the Bible of Jesus' day), 2 Chronicles was the last book of the Scripture, not Malachi. (That's as it continues to be in Judaism today.) So here are the closing words of the Hebrew book of Scripture. As you read it, look for similarities with the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28.

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up." (2 Chronicles 36:23)

In the final scene of the first *Spielmann* movie, Peter Parker's friend Harry Osborn finds his father's Green Goblin paraphernalia: mask, rights, weapons—that kind of thing.

In using this connecting sequence, the filmmakers were letting us know that the plot of *Spiderman* was going to be continued in *Spiderman 2*, though the Green Goblin would be replaced by his son, Harry Osborn. That is precisely how this passage functions.

Being a unified story, the Old Testament ends by bringing us back to the plot. The Jews had been exiled from their land (also wondering what was happening to the plot), and God used their captor, Cyrus, king of Persia, to recommission them and call them back to the plot. That plot, once again, was the expansion of God's kingdom, which of course centered around Israel as a lighthouse to the nations. So they were told to "go" and rebuild Jerusalem, knowing that God would be "with them" in the mission. And Cyrus, arrogant mortal that he was, made this declaration on the basis that "all authority" belonged to him.

Jesus, in playing off these final words, was picking up the plot line of the Old Testament and threatening it into the New. The importance of the Great Commission and its connection to the last page of the Old Testament is to announce that the plot of Part One would continue in Part Two (the New Covenant), but the role of Israel would now be played by the church, with a few important nuances that Jesus delineated:

- His disciples were to "go out" to the nations, not "go up" to Jerusalem. (Israel, geographically, was no longer central to God's plan.)
- All authority to complete the mission belonged to Jesus, not to King Cyrus.
- Kingdom expansion was now the responsibility of the church, not Israel.

- The church would manifest the kingdom of God on earth as a spiritual kingdom, not a geographic one like Israel.

- This kingdom would be comprised of people from every nation, not just one, as ethnic Israel had been.
- And last but surely not least, the king of God's kingdom, unnamed in the Old Testament, is Jesus.

There are of course other nuances, but these are the ones implicit in the Great Commission. The bottom line: though the plot had thickened, it had not changed. God's people were to expand his kingdom to the world, proclaiming its king to every nation.

Out of the barren womb of Sarah, God created the nation of Israel. And out of a barren Israel, Jesus created the church. All for the furtherance of the plot.

In the Great Commission, Jesus called his followers to engage in the plot, embrace it, and bring it to its climax and resolution. In fact, the New Testament ends with a vision given to the apostle John of the story's resolution, when the kingdom will have expanded to every nation and where at least one person from every people group will "call upon the Lord":

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10)

As the church now heads into its third millennium, you might wonder when

the story is going to end. Jesus has already given us a partial answer. The story will end when the plot has been resolved: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14).

The Book of Acts

After giving his disciples a Very Large Commission (to take the gospel to the entire world), you might assume that Jesus would have sent them packing and launched them out into the world with a sense of urgency: "Send a postcard when you get there. Don't let the door hit you on your way out." Instead, Jesus told them to do nothing and go nowhere (that's my kind of commandment) but to wait in Jerusalem: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:4, 8).

Let's begin with this historical point of reference: by the early fourth century, the entire Roman Empire had heard and—by and large—embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, how likely is it that a handful of uneducated fishermen could pull this off? Not very. In fact, Jesus had sent them on an impossible errand, its success achievable only through his power. And so they were told to sit on their hands until that power arrived. In Acts 2, power arrives:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

It was like the Tower of Babel, where God confused human speech, only in reverse: members of one kingdom praising God in an assortment of languages. This symbolized the impending proclamation to the nations of the world and their inclusion into the kingdom of God.

Dr. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, made the following observation concerning the Spirit's empowerment for the mission:

But it is a fact of history that the people to whom Jesus gave His Great Commission were common, ordinary, working people, plagued with the same weaknesses that we have. The only difference between most of them and

the majority of us is that two outstanding things had happened to them. First, they had complete confidence in a resurrected Lord triumphant over death. One who lived within them and was coming again to reign on the earth. Second, they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Today, if enough Christians were completely committed to our resurrected and returning Lord, and were controlled and empowered by His Spirit, we would turn our world upside down, and experience a mighty spiritual revolution like that in the first century.

After reporting on the infilling of the Holy Spirit, the book of Acts reckons with the disciples for the next thirty years as they moved out to fulfill Jesus' command to proclaim the gospel to every nation on earth. By the close of the New Testament era (roughly the end of the first century), the good news of the kingdom had spread through most of the Roman Empire, making inroads as far east as Asia; throughout eastern, western, and southern Europe; and down into north Africa. An impressive campaign for foot soldiers in sandals.

The Missionary Handbook

Besides reporting on the progress of the gospel as it spread from region to region and nation to nation, the book of Acts serves as a missionary handbook. Over the last two thousand years, churches, missionaries, pastors, mission agencies, and seminaries have turned here for a model and textbook on world evangelization. So, while we're here, we might as well take down a few notes.

Evangelism

I don't know what you picture when you think of the disciples going into a strange town and preaching the gospel. Many probably think it wasn't so weird for people to do that "back then." I don't know why we assume that about the past (*The Emperor used to massacre farm animals by running over them in his chariot . . . but I guess people used to do that back then!*). No, there were a lot of things that were weird even back then, and walking into a foreign town to talk about a crucified convict being the Savior of the world would certainly have been among them.

Though empowered by the Spirit, the disciples gave careful, prayerful consideration of how to address and contextualize the gospel to their audience. They assumed that God did not give his Spirit to replace wisdom but instead to animate it.

For example, the book of Acts relates that when the apostle Paul came to a new town or city he would typically speak first to the local synagogue. Good idea. Here you'd find Jews familiar with the Scripture, even anticipating a Messiah.



There were a lot of things that were weird even back then, and walking into a foreign town to talk about a crucified convict being the Savior of the world would certainly have been among them.

You'd also find spiritually open Gentiles, those who had all but converted to Judaism, except for the festive initiation rite of circumcision. As a visiting rabbi and scholar, Paul would have had the synagogue meeting politely turned over to him—then violently taken from him as the congregation heard what he had to say. Still, in those initial meetings, Paul's preaching and the Spirit's conviction would stir the hearts of some. They, in turn, would become the first converts in that city and allow Paul, no longer welcome in the synagogue, to hold meetings in their homes.

Without a public forum, Paul's evangelism would travel along the tracks of relational networks. New converts would immediately share with their friends and family and invite them to meetings in their home where they could hear the message in its entirety from the apostle.

And so we note these same three modes of evangelism as the gospel traveled from town to town and as it has traveled down through the ages. First, there was the public proclamation of the gospel (an evangelistic outreach). Second, there was relational evangelism as new converts shared with their friends and family. And finally, there was "body evangelism"—the term given to inviting nonbelievers to participate in a Christian gathering, such as a church service, a Bible study, or prayer.

Missionaries

In the first few decades of the church everyone was a missionary, one of three varieties. There were full-time pioneers such as the apostles Paul and Peter, whose vocation was preaching the gospel and planting churches. There were short-term missionaries, such as Philip, Mark, and Luke, who jumped into the labor for a season as the Lord led. And there were lay missionaries, or people who simply transported the gospel in the course of their life and work and who provided funding for the ministry.

Every member of the body engaged in some way in expanding the kingdom.

Finances

Projects cost money. Big projects cost big money. MGM Mirage spent \$7 billion for a new City Center (read: casino and resort). If a casino is worthy of a \$7 billion dollar investment, I'm not sure what price tag you'd put on the construction of God's kingdom. Ideally, funding would be equivalent to the magnitude and magnificence of the structure—ideally.

The book of Acts introduces us to the less than ideal financial struggles and budgetary problems of kingdom expansion. A careful reading of the New Testament letters reveal that several of them had as a primary goal raising money for the mission. They were "support letters," as here:

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? . . . If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:7,11)

While some of the early missionaries worked jobs on the side (Paul was a tennmaker) so as not to burden or hinder the new churches they were planting, this was an exception to the biblical principle. As Paul put it, "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14).

The spirit of 1 Corinthians 9:14 is that missionaries have given of their lives to expand God's kingdom and should not have to work two jobs because others are unwilling to give of themselves to fund it. The mission requires sacrifice from everyone.

Parishurch

The last observation is grounded upon this question: what church did Paul and his missionary band report to? What we see in the missionary endeavors of the disciples is the emergence of the first parishurch structure. Organizations such as seminaries, orphanages, book publishers, and mission agencies are not really churches, are they? Yet they serve specific roles in the mission of the church. Some have questioned the legitimacy of such structures, but they are biblically grounded here in Acts. As soon as the church moved out in mission, and anytime in history it has done so, the Spirit raises up such structures to provide focus, resources, and stewardship to the endeavor.



Well, you can read the book of Acts for yourself and add your own observations—our tour bus must move on. We have now traced the Bible's story line through the Old Testament and into the New. Now all we need to complete the picture is an idea of where we stand today. Are we almost done? How many people still need to hear about Jesus? What nations have been reached with the gospel? How long until the words of Jesus are fulfilled? "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14)?

Where Are We Today?

So, how many people have heard the gospel? A lot. Next question.

Sorry, I dislike research, but I suppose that won't suffice for an answer, and we really do need some answers. You can't get serious about a task without knowing what has been done and what has been left undone.

But no sooner do we ask the question "How many nations still need to hear the gospel?" than we realize that assigning numbers to this thing is going to get tricky. For example, by "nations," do we mean countries, languages, or ethnic groups? As there are less than two hundred countries and some sixteen thousand ethnic groups, the difference is not exactly semantics. And when we talk of exposing a nation to the gospel, do we mean they are in range of a Christian radio broadcast? That they have a Bible translated into their language? That there is a viable church within driving distance? No, providing accurate numbers is not going to be tricky; it's going to be impossible. But that doesn't mean we can't get a general picture of the work that still lies before us.

If we were to think about preaching the gospel to the world in terms of exposing it to the gospel message, we have indeed traveled far—insanely far in the last few decades, due in part to the advance of technology. Perhaps the best gauge of this

progress would be the JESUS film, a cinematic version of the Gospel of Luke produced by Campus Crusade for Christ. Produced in 1979, the movie is lacking in special effects, acting, art direction, script . . . all around, just generally lacking. But Oscar nods was not its objective; exposing the world to the gospel was, and on that account it is the greatest movie ever made. As of this moment, 6 billion people have viewed the film, with 200 million indicating decisions to trust Christ. As there are only a little under 7 billion people in the world, this is a staggering accomplishment.

The film has been translated into over a thousand languages, which represent the vast majority of the tongues spoken by the world's population. What I mean by that is that there are currently 6,912 languages spoken in the world (ethnologue.com), but about 2,000 of them are spoken by fewer than a thousand people, and linguists generally agree that roughly 3,500 languages will disappear entirely by the end of this century. In fact, one falls out of use about every two weeks. Ah, globalization.

With that understanding of languages, there are currently 2,400 languages that have some or all of the Bible and 4,037 languages with some form of the Bible in audio recording (CD, Tape, MP3). Only 3 percent of the world speaks a language that does not yet have an intelligible translation of the gospel, and most of these translations can be found on the Internet. In fact, 90 percent of the world's people, should they stumble upon a Starbucks, could go online and find the gospel in a language they understand. And they could read it as they sip a cup of coffee that cost them a year's wages.

In light of technology and globalization, I don't think there's an executive at Coca-Cola who doubts that somewhere between the years 2050 and 2075 everyone on the planet will both know about and have access to a can of Coke. I think the same is true for the gospel, and if not, shame on us. It is an amazing time to be alive and involved in the Great Commission. Of all the generations that have lived since Jesus uttered it, we alone live at a time of fulfillment.

Remains of the Day

Yet, having been entrusted with the expansion of God's kingdom to the nations, we want to be the best stewards of the responsibility given to us. Better to do more than not do what we were supposed to. To that end, mission agencies have set as a goal establishing a vibrant church presence within every people group.

In seeking to establish a vibrant church presence in every known people group, this goal goes far beyond exposing a

nation to the gospel or simply planting a church there. This goal goes far beyond reaching the major people groups in the world and even further beyond translating the gospel into all known languages; it breaks down the world's inhabitants into their smallest discernible ethnic identities (a number approximating sixteen thousand) and desires to establish the church there. Again, as we don't precisely know how small and distinct Jesus was being when he spoke of "nations" (ethnic groups), it's better to do too much than not enough.

Current statistics indicate that about 40 percent of the world's people groups are without a significant Christian presence. We refer to them as the unreached or least reached. By definition, the unreached lack an indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize the people group. This is based on a belief that it takes about 2 percent of a people group to be Christian in order for them to be influential enough to impact the whole.

Interestingly, the majority of these people groups (representing some 2.24 billion people) are clustered in what is called the 10/40 window, that area of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that lies between 10 and 40 degrees north latitude. The statistical details of these unreached or least reached people groups are as follows:

- The largest least-reached group is the Japanese, with over 120 million individuals.
- A total of 3,276 groups are primarily Muslim, including nearly 1.3 billion individuals.
- A total of 2,426 groups are primarily Hindu, including about 900 million individuals.
- A total of 555 groups are primarily Buddhist, totaling nearly 375 million individuals.

There are, of course, other unreached people groups in the world, but if you're looking to be on the front lines of the last frontier, think somewhere between 10 and 40 degrees north of the

equator. I mean, the sooner this thing is finished, the sooner we all can go home, right?

Students

Well, we need to look at one last chapter in the story of God's global plan of redemption, one that has direct implications for us. We need to grasp the significance of this statement made by missiologist David Howard:

All too frequently the Church has fallen into lethargy in relation to its world-wide obligations. But God does not leave Himself without a witness.

Whether it be a Nicodas Von Zinzendorf, a Samuel Mills, a C. T. Studd, a Robert Wilder, a John Mort, a Jim Elliot or a hundred others who could be named, God singles out a man to prophesy to His church. And with remarkable frequency that man has been a student.²

In one sense this shouldn't surprise us. When we think of the great heroes of the Bible, it's easy to forget that many of them were just over the throes of puberty when God began to work in their lives. Daniel, Joseph (of Genesis), David, Gideon, Samuel, Solomon, Josiah—when God called them, they had barely begun to shave (which I suppose is a moot point, as clean shaven was not a desired look for Jewish men).

Yet God choosing to use young people is one thing; his choosing to use the university is quite another. The college campus is hosted only by the brother, casino, and communist party for Most Godless Institution on the planet. Consequently, we might assume that God's redemptive plan would have bypassed this worldly setting. But instead it has become the capital of the missionary enterprise, a commuting hub, transporting the gospel and kingdom

workers to all destinations north, south, east, and west.

Campus ministry is not the brainchild of any person or organization but is based on the observation that in the last five centuries God has used the campus and college students as his primary vehicle for fulfilling the Great Commission.

The Reformation was staged on the campuses of Wittenberg, Geneva, Zurich, and Toulouse. The Pietist movement of the seventeenth century was birthed in the German universities of Leipzig, Wittenburg, and Halle. The spiritual heritage of the United States was grounded upon the Puritans, who proliferated their teaching and trained their leaders through the institutions of Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Dartmouth. And the great awakenings of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries were invariably led and spread through students and campuses, including the ministries of Wesley and Whitefield, which were incubated at Oxford University. In fact, the greatest missionary thrust in the history of the church was the Student Volunteer Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a collegiate missionary enterprise that sent out some twenty thousand full-time missionaries to the far-flung reaches of the planet.

God has been the architect of the campus mission strategy, and he continues to energize and utilize it today.

A Sammler Strategy for Twenty-First-Century Missions

If you were to ask any missionary what is the most needed resource to complete the Great Commission, his or her answer invariably would be "people." The gospel is powerful, but it cannot provide its own transportation.

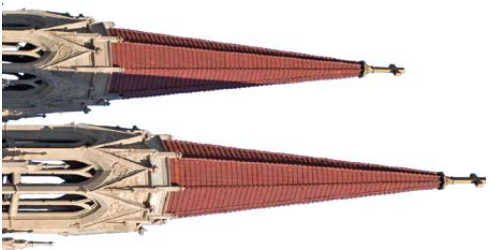
Now consider the brilliance of God in addressing this need for missionary labor

through college students:

Today's college students have nearly four months a year allotted for summer break. What this provides is an enormous temporary labor force that can be utilized either by McDonalds or, more strategically, for short-term missions. Think about it: when will working adults ever have four months free of commitments to pioneer ministry in another country?

Now add to this another door open only to students. There are countries—particularly those in the 10/40 window—where missionaries are forbidden access. Muslim countries, for example, do not warmly welcome incoming evangelists. But college students with a student visa can travel to virtually any country and enjoy an open door at any of that nation's universities, providing a place to stay, a reason to be there, and a base of operation for ministry.

And while college students typically comprise less than 1 percent of a nation's





Being involved in the Great Commission is really not an option for a follower of Christ; the only question is how and where we are to be a part of it.

population, they are in fact the powerful percent. In any given country, the religious, athletic, military, social, political, and scientific leaders will all come from this 1 percent. To reach the campus with the gospel is to affect the entire country, making the university the ideal target of missions.

There is a final providential twist to all this. A common obstacle to foreign missions is the time required to learn a new language. However, on the college campus—this being the most educated stratum of society—students often speak multiple languages, and most speak English to some degree, allowing students to share their faith without a language barrier.

And so a group of students, free of commitments for several months, can go into a closed country with their student visas, sharing Christ without a language barrier, and when they leave the country, some members of the team can remain behind (audit a class) and continue to disciple the new and young believers. A seamless strategy.

With the Great Commission in mind, Jesus told his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2). It certainly seems that the college campus has been a major answer to that prayer, and as the task moves toward completion, college students will undoubtedly be at the center of it.

Conclusion

That’s what God has been up to. That is the plot of history, of Scripture, and of our lives as well. Being involved in the Great Commission is really not an option for a follower of Christ; the only question is how and where we are to be a part of it.

¹ John Noble Wilford, “Languages Die But Not Their last Words,” New York Times, September, 19, 2007.

² 1. Quoted in David Bryant, *In the Gap* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), p. 97.

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Justicia Par Yuri!: Rise Up and Engage Injustice

Bethany H. Hoang

It was 10 p.m. Thursday night. In the crowded bus depot I sat quietly, preparing to lull myself to sleep once I boarded the bus - an attempt that would prove futile. It would be a dark, airless, waterless, 8 hour climb up to 15,000 feet and back down again as we traveled from the Andean city of Huánuco, Peru back to the sprawling capital of Lima.

As I looked into the crowd, I saw that Yuri's family had arrived. Yuri's mother would be coming with us to Lima. As I looked at Yuri's brother and father, I felt speechless. I couldn't help but stare at Yuri's father's eyes. Even as his body stood tall and strong, his eyes were so worn. His eyes carried the profound grief of life-shattering injustice.

This father's 8-year-old daughter Yuri was raped, then murdered by being thrown from a building. The police then "misplaced" basic forensic evidence and abandoned her case. I find it hard to comprehend what it must be like to have one's life pervasively marred by injustice. Injustice is a vague term for those of us who rarely experience it in our protected lives - the machineries of power are more often on our side than against us. But injustice is a daily reality for Yuri's family. They know all too well that injustice is an abuse of power, where someone with more power takes from someone with less power. And it is not the frivolities and luxuries of life that are taken from the vulnerable, but rather the basics - freedom, dignity, and life itself.

Unbearable

I could hardly sleep that week. The jarring facts of Yuri's case - the quiet, desperate pleading of Yuri's mother as she passed around graphic photos from the scene of the rape and murder; the sunken eyes of Yuri's father, dejected in his inability to protect his defiled and dead daughter - swirled in my heart and mind. I found myself hinging on utter despondence.

I thought back to Cambodia, and the corridors of Tou Sleng Prison. This prison once served as a holding place for torturing innocent Cambodian citizens before they were taken to the killing fields and slaughtered. As I wandered the corridors and empty cells, I came to a scribbling on the wall. Barely legible, it read, "The pain of man's inhumanity to man is unbearable." Underneath someone had taken a sharp object and literally scraped into the wall the phrase "Bear Witness."

I often think about that writing on the wall. I think about it when I get lost in the dark corridors of my mind, corridors that lead me to places of broken-hearted fear and despondency. And I think that, on one level, the writing on that wall is right on. When and if we begin to open ourselves to see inhumanity and injustice around the globe, "man's inhumanity to man" becomes crushing. Often paralyzing. And, at worst, numbing.

And yet I think that God asks us, as those made in his image, to let ourselves be drawn into the pain of suffering and violence. To let it break our hearts. Even to lead others to these places of pain. We are called to "bear witness." But our witness should not end with observation. We are called to live as those who, in the midst of the unbearableness of the pain, do not shrink back but rather rise up. We are called to rise up, engage injustice, take "the pain of man's inhumanity to man," and bring it to the foot of the cross. Jesus Himself promises that He will redeem all things, that He will make all things new.

Even rape and murder and corruption.

But I wonder if we actually believe this?

Aroma or Stench?

Do we believe that justice is central to the heart of God? Do we believe that God desires for justice to be one of the central focuses of the Church's identity and mission? Do we believe that justice is

an essential pursuit for all those who follow Jesus? Do we believe that we personally are called to do justice? Do we believe that we are called to lead others into a lifestyle of justice? Or do we believe that justice is a niche for some to pursue and others to observe?

The truth is if our lives do not include the pursuit of justice, all of our other efforts to worship God become foul stench. We literally stink in his presence. In descriptions of sacrificial offering in the Hebrew scriptures, the Law states that the burning will create "an aroma pleasing to the Lord." Thirty-nine times this phrase appears in the scriptures. But there are two scenarios when the sacrificial aroma becomes an abhorrence to the Lord. In Leviticus 26, this is due to the people's unrelenting idol worship. In Isaiah, it is from the absence of justice.

Throughout Isaiah it is clear that even as God's people are worshipping according to the Law, they are neglecting what Jesus calls "the weightier matters of the Law" (Matthew 23:23 NIV). More specifically, they are neglecting justice. God cries out to His people, saying, "Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right." And then He immediately defines what is right in His eyes: "Seek justice, rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:17 NIV)

Whenever the aroma of sacrifice has not been pleasing to the Lord, it has not been a matter of neglected acts of worship, but rather a matter of the mind and heart. Isaiah laments to us, "Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness - only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil. - Wash and make yourselves clean." (Isaiah 1:5-6, 16 NIV)

Learn To Do Right

How do we come before the Lord with a pure heart and a healed mind that desires justice, that lives a life of bringing justice to others? How do we escape from understanding justice as a niche ministry to be done by the brave and marginal few and bring it into our whole heads, our whole hearts, our whole lives?

The pursuit of justice involves first a constant intent to "learn to do right." We learn first by reading scripture with new eyes, absorbing its continual call to justice. We need to lay a firm foundation of biblical justice on which our lives and leadership can stand. While there are 39 scripture references to the pleasing aroma of burnt sacrifices, the 40th reference is to the melding of our lives with Jesus' life. Paul tells us in II Corinthians that "*we are to God the aroma of Christ*" (2:15 NIV). Growing into a heart, mind, and whole life of justice is a matter of living our identity in Jesus. It is an issue of discipleship - "learning" from how Jesus lives.

How does Jesus live? What is his identity? His aroma? Jesus himself made it clear to us: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed." (Luke 4:18 NIV)

Learning also comes simply and necessarily by diving in, by going to places where systems of justice are broken, and by spending time with the people whose lives are broken as a result. We need only ask God to open our eyes and lead us where He wants us to go. Is there a place in your community or in the world you've always wondered about? Go to that place. Protect the vulnerable. Look for ways to intervene in the abuses of power. Go with the intent to lead others in mapping territory for the work of justice. Figure out how justice systems are broken, listen to those who are victimized by injustice, and ask God for a plan to make an impact.

If this feels daunting, think of the brilliant victories of history. There may be 27 million slaves in the world today, but 150 years ago slavery was abolished in our own country. In the past year IJM has seen hundreds of slaves rescued in other nations. Hundreds quickly turn to millions and finally to total abolition as perpetrators begin to see that they are being held accountable. There may be a million

women and girls newly trafficked into forced prostitution each year, but in the past few weeks dozens of these women and children were rescued; their brothel owners and traffickers prosecuted, ending the cycle of oppression. Red-light districts are shrinking and sex tourist towns disappearing as accountability rises.

The Church needs only to live her identity - to show up and see how God will work through us. As we grow in conviction that justice is central to our calling as followers of Jesus, we will need to increasingly understand justice itself as a spiritual discipline. Justice work can all too easily look like a firecracker - even if we explode with conviction, excitement quickly dies, and with it, commitment. We must daily ask God for the perseverance to move forward. We must continue to stare injustice in the face, get up under it and carry it forward to the foot of the cross. It is a work that can be carried as we ourselves are carried by the Holy Spirit.

Recalibrating the Scales

International Justice Mission's (IJM) casework partner in Peru has an attorney named Roberto.* Roberto knows that when cases such as Yuri's are overlooked and forgotten on the individual scale, injustice on the systemic scale flourishes. But if you pursue even one case of unprosecuted rape, land seizure, illegal detention, slavery or sex trafficking among the millions, the scales of injustice begin to recalibrate. Those who assumed they had no accountability begin to realize that others are paying attention. Corruption becomes more costly. And so Roberto took Yuri's case, and the entire staff threw themselves into seeking "*justicia para Yuri - justicia para Yuri*" (the chanting of the crowd still rings in my head). They plastered the town with the details of the injustice done to Yuri. They made the vague clear. They brought words to the unspeakable.

Yuri's perpetrators were finally brought to trial. In a pre-meeting with the supreme court judges, we were told that the poor rarely receive justice. The trial resulted in the full acquittal of the two men who had the most influence and means and the conviction of a boy who had no means, no influence and little evidence against him. Leaving the jail compound, we found ourselves driving alongside a red truck carrying not only the supreme court justices, but also the "defense" attorney. Two days later, Yuri's mother said goodbye to her husband and son and boarded a bus with us to make the long overnight trip to Lima.

Our small band of lawyers, social workers, Yuri's mother, and volunteers from various churches arrived in Lima at 6 a.m., showered, drank some coffee, put on our best suits, and mounted the steps of the Peruvian National Congress. Press conferences, meetings with congressmen and news broadcasting that day would bring Yuri's case out of the shadows of a small city and into the Peruvian limelight. Unprecedented defense of the poor would gain attention throughout the nation, setting a mark, laying the claim that the voiceless will be given a voice.

Yuri may be gone, and her trial still in appeals, but persevering against injustice is a testimony to the love God Himself gives to us. It is a work of bearing witness - not to inhumanity as a final reality, but to Jesus' power to rescue, to heal, and to make all things new.

May we cleanse ourselves of broken-hearted fear and daily ask God to make us His people who are marked and moved instead by broken-hearted courage. May we be an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

** To conceal their identities and safeguard ongoing IJM casework, we have used pseudonyms for particular individuals mentioned here, though the stories themselves are real. Actual names and casework are on file with IJM.*

International Justice Mission is a human rights agency that rescues victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery, and oppression. For more information and to mobilize, go to <http://www.ijm.org/>.

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Bethany H. Hoang travels globally, speaking and teaching to thousands on behalf of IJM at churches, conferences, and universities. As Director of the IJM Institute, Mrs. Hoang is responsible for creating and implementing a variety of cutting-edge initiatives that are designed to engage the worldwide church and academic communities in a deeper level of understanding, passion, and commitment to seeking justice on behalf of those who suffer abuse and oppression in our world.

Lesson 7- Power of Prayer

Ephesians 3:14-23

HOOK:

***Context:** As Paul moves on from section #1 (chapters 1-3) to section #2 (Chapters 4-6) he begins to pray once again. He realizes that the things he has talked about will only stay in the head of his listeners without the power of God to sink them deeper into their hearts. In a beautifully powerful way, Paul lets us listen into his heart as he goes before the Father to ask him to move in the hearts of his readers. This is one of the great prayers in the Bible. Out of New Testament prayers, besides the Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6, this may be the most repeatedly prayed prayer of any. We ought to spend some time looking into it and gaining some wisdom don't you think?

Ask:

- What's the deal with prayer? What happens when we pray? "If God Already Knows, Why Pray" is the title of a book and a great question?
- How would you describe your prayer life? When was/has it been the strongest in your life?

Read the Section: Ephesians 3:14-23

LOOK:

Reason for Prayer- Ephesians 3:14

1. "For this reason". What reason? Look back and see what Paul is referring to?

In contrast to vs. 3's "for this reason", it seems to me here that Paul is NOT just referring to the immediately preceding verses, but rather to the whole of what he has taught so far. He has been preaching with passion about the greatness of God's blessings and the message of grace for the Gentiles. He can now do no other than break out in prayer.

2. What do you think in particular has motivated Paul here to pray?

Worship of Christ's greatness calls him to pray ultimately. But more immediately here, he realizes that all his words are for naught if the Spirit of God does not take them from the pages and drive them into his listeners' hearts. We are a people known for our plans and efforts but little known for praying that God would empower our plans and efforts. Better yet, asking him for his plans and efforts. Here, given Paul's purpose, he is in desperate need of God's power through prayer.

3. Does God change His mind? Does prayer really do anything? Maybe it is more about changing us? What motivates us to pray if God is going to do it anyways?

These are tough questions, prayer is a challenging topic to understand given the paradox that we are commanded to pray, He tells us He will answer prayers, but then we know that He is sovereign and predestines all things! One of the great answers we have to this problem is Paul's example. He taught in Eph 1 that God predestines all things, but then we see Him here laying his desires before Jesus. Paul understood it better than we ever will and he models both are true at the same time. God is sovereign, yet He answers our prayers....

4. Spend 5 minutes with a partner. What reasons do you have to pray? What about God's character would lead you to pray and what is it that you need him to do?

What to Pray- Ephesians 3:16-23

1. Get together with a partner again. Work through the passage. What specifically does Paul pray for? Write them out below. (Focus on what he actually asks for, not the clarifying statements.)

[16] That according to the riches of his glory

1-he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

[17] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—

2- that you, being rooted and grounded in love,

[18] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

3-[19] and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[20] Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,

4-[21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Notice that there are 4 main things that Paul prays for by this account.

- 1) The Ephesians would be strengthened with power so that Christ would sink to their hearts by faith*
- 2) To be rooted and strengthened with God's love*
- 3) To know the God's love to be filled with it*
- 4) For God's glory*

2. Using this framework, write out a model of prayer to follow. I.e. "ACTS" is a common model of prayer used. (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) Can you come up with a model of prayer from this prayer. Focus on the main prayer points Paul makes but use the subcategories of the main points as well

3. Where does our power come from? (Search the text)

Through His spirit, in our inner being v.16. Change does not happen by our trying harder or following a self-help program. Those are temporary fixes that won't last or at least won't deal with our hearts deep down. We need the power of God through his spirit to really change at a foundational level.

3. What are the reasons we need power in the Christian life?

Prayer is one of the true marks of being a Christian. It has been said, if you are truly a Christian, you will learn to pray! The Christian life is one of supernatural reality. How could one not talk to God and be in relationship with that same God. As a Christian, you must pray. You must begin to fathom that the spiritual world is just as real as the physical world. It is just harder for us to sense sometimes. We need power from God to fathom His love for us, to fathom His reality, power to change our heart, our minds, and our wills in a supernatural way!

4. What prevents us from praying with power?

Lack of belief, lack of discipline, lack of understanding prayer, sin....etc.

5. If you could pray limitless prayers, what would you pray for? Why don't we pray that way then?

6. What are the limits of God's power? **Read: John 14:13-14, 1 John 5:14-15, Philippians 2:13**

God has given us a blank check with his signature! All we have to do is fill it out! Of course the limiting factor is that it is according to His will. As we grow closer with Christ our hearts and minds are changed by Him. As we are changed, amazingly the things He wants become the things we want. It is a circular thought. We are changed at a heart level. Then when we go back to ask God for more and more, the things we ask are His will as He has changed our hearts and minds.

Philippians 2:13 has been particularly instructive to me in this light. What might limit our "work or action" mentioned in 2:13? It is related to our "will". God must change our will before we change our actions in any long lasting way. Often times we pray for God to change our actions, but honestly, we are not convinced that we really want to change! Be honest with God. According to this verse, ask Him first that He might even change your will first and then change your actions. That is the power of change at a heart level that this Ephesians passage is talking about!

***Notebooks:** What could you dream that God would do in or through you with His power?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

Assignment:

- Read Prayer by John Piper (articles following)
- Begin to write down specific prayers in a journal and record answers.
- Commit to a daily time of prayer.
- Memorize Ephesians 3:20-21

Suggested Reading and Resources: If God Already Knows, Why Pray?, Douglas F. Kelly; Pray With Your Eyes Open, Richard Pratt; Fireseeds of Spiritual Awakening, Dan Hayes

What Do Answers to Prayer Depend On? Part One: Obedience

John Piper

Unanswered prayer is a universal Christian experience. Every one of us has asked God for particular things that have been denied: we asked for help to make a B and only got a C; we asked for sleep and lay awake all night; we asked that her attitude be changed and she stayed as sour as ever; we asked that they not go ahead with the divorce and they did it anyway; we asked that he be protected in Vietnam and he was killed; we asked that she be given the job and they gave it to another; we asked that the place be full and only a few showed up; we asked that she be healed but she passed away. The experience is so common we have woven it into our hymns. One of the old Swedish hymns says,

Thanks for prayers that Thou hast answered,
Thanks for what Thou dost deny!
Thanks for storms that I have weathered,
Thanks for all Thou dost supply!

Another familiar hymn says,

Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear,
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;
Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

It is an agonizing thing to cry out to God for the life of a loved one and watch it ebb irrevocably away.

So I have been thinking a lot about prayer lately. And at this point I have a three-week plan. Today's message is the first of two in which I try to give a Biblical answer to the question, "What do answers to prayer depend on?" The second half of this series will come on January 25th, the Lord willing. Between these two I plan to preach next Sunday from 1 Timothy 2:2 under the title, "Pray for Kings and All in High Positions." That is the Sunday before the presidential inauguration.

The question I want to begin to answer today is, "What do answers to prayer depend on?" It is a huge question and has to be broken down into parts. One part would be, "What has *God* done that our prayers might be answered?"; another part would be, "What must we do that our prayers might be answered?" Today I will try to answer the first part of the question and begin to answer the second part. Then on the 25th I hope to continue with the second. But first, what has *God* done that our prayers might be answered?

If Jesus Christ had not come into the world and died for our sins then the wrath of God would not be removed from us. The power of God would all be aimed at our destruction. But, as Paul says, "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And in dying for us and bearing our sin in his body (1 Peter 2:24) Christ propitiated God; that is, He appeased the wrath of God; He satisfied the demands of God's justice. The result is that for all those who hold to Christ the wrath of God is turned away and in its place there is mercy. God no longer opposes the sinner who trusts in Christ; instead He now is working for that sinner's good. In fact, He is rejoicing over him to do him good with all his heart and with all his soul (Jeremiah 32:40f). Therefore, not only our final joy of salvation, but all the good that comes to us was purchased at Calvary. If it were not for the death of Jesus everything you and I experience would be a token of God's wrath. But since Jesus has died and we have become beneficiaries of that death, everything that happens to us, even our trouble, is a token of God's love. Paul said in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?" Which means, the death of Jesus secures for those who trust Him every possible blessing that God can give. Therefore, all the answers to our prayers are owing to the death of Jesus. What has God done in order that our prayers might be answered? He has sent His dearly loved and only Son to absorb His own wrath against sin and to lead us into the green pastures of His favor where there is mercy and grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16). Jesus died for our sins that our prayers might be answered. (That is why all of our prayers are "in Jesus' name.") Therefore, nothing that I say in the rest of this sermon should be construed to mean that we ever merit or deserve answers to our prayers. We deserve the punishment of hell, every one of us, for the scorn we have heaped on God's glory by refusing to trust His promises and delight in His will. Any blessing at all that comes to us, including all the answers to our prayers, is sheer mercy on God's part. Therefore, whatever the conditions are that we must fulfill in order to have our prayers answered, they should not be viewed as work done to earn God's favor, but rather as things done in response to and for the enjoyment of His mercy.

That is the question I want to turn to now. What must we do in order to have our prayers answered? When I say "we" I have in mind Christians, that is, people who are trusting Christ-- that what He did purchased their salvation, and what He said is true and the best advice in the world. As far as unbelievers are concerned, there is one prayer that we know God answers for them, the earnest plea to Christ for salvation. Whether God answers any other prayers of those who reject Christ is irrelevant. It is irrelevant whether persons who throw away eternal life and insist on going to hell are given a few earthly pleasures along the way. The only thing such pleasures will do for them, if they persist in their unbelief, is to make their guilt and their torment all the worse because they don't use them as an occasion for repentance. So it is no great boon even if God does answer some of their prayers.

The issue that has been in the press recently as to whether God answers the prayers of Jews who reject Christ obscures the vastly more important question: Are Jews who reject Christ saved? And the answer from the New Testament is clearly that they are not. They, with all other unbelievers, are under the curse of God (Romans 9:3; Galatians 1:9), and at the judgment day will be sentenced to eternal condemnation, if they have persistently refused to trust Christ. Jesus said to the Jews of His day, "The men of Nineveh will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). And John said in his first letter,

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He who does not believe God has made Him a liar because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to His Son. And this is the testimony: that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; He who has not the Son of God has not life. (1 John 5:10-12)

Jew, Gentile, white, black, red, yellow, male, female: if they reject the Son they do not have eternal life. A helpful way to hold the Jewish question in proper perspective is this: if a Jew rejects the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, then he joins the gentiles in their condemnation. And if a gentile accepts the Messiah and trusts in him, then he joins the true Israel and its salvation.

So my response to the issue in the press is this: except for the prayer to be saved through Jesus Christ, the prayer of unbelieving Jews and gentiles are of little value to them because even if they are answered they only store up more wrath for the day of judgment (Romans 2:4,5). In order for answered prayers to be a lasting blessing for the person who prays, that person must be saved, he must be a believer in Christ. That is why I am talking only about Christians when I ask, "What must we do in order to have our prayers answered?"

I start my answer to this by focusing on our peculiar relationship to God as Christians, namely, the relationship of Father and children. Jesus said,

Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for fish will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him (Matthew 7:7-11).

Becoming a Christian means being adopted into the family of God so that all our praying is the talk of a child to his father. "I love you, daddy." "Thank you, daddy." "You're a good daddy." "Daddy, I need help."

That brings us to the next observation: If a child has certain bad attitudes and misbehaves, a good father will not give him everything he asks for. Accordingly, the Bible teaches that in order for our prayers to be answered we must do our father's will. Jesus said in John 15:7, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you." A child who disregards his father's words (Jesus' words are the Father's words) is not fit to have his requests granted. We would not approve a father's behavior who did everything a rebellious child wished. Not just because the child doesn't deserve it but because it would be bad for the child and a dishonor to the father's word. It is not a good thing to confirm a child in his waywardness by giving him whatever he asks. No, if my words abide in you, son, then ask what you will and I'll do it.

There are many other places in Scripture where this same thing is taught. John says in his first letter (3:21-23),

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us we have confidence before God; and we receive from Him whatever we ask *because* we keep His

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commandments and do what pleases Him. And this is His commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another just as He commanded us.

If we are unloving, irritable, holding a grudge, impatient, unkind, boastful, jealous, resentful we should not think that God is likely to answer our prayers. His will for us is that we love one another, therefore, He will be slow to prosper our cause when our attitudes are unloving.

Peter wrote in his first letter (3:7):

Husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker vessel, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.

Then four verses later he says,

Turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those that do evil.

Surely, the word directed to husbands applies to both partners: if you are not considerate of each other, if you are not forgiving and kind and respectful at home, your prayers are going to be hindered, and not just in the making but in the answering. "For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and His ears are open to *their* prayer." And by "righteous" Peter means those who do what is right and loving in their family.

And that is what James taught also, isn't it? James 5:16,

Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.

Why? Well, that is the way it is between a father and his child. A child who keeps his Father's words and does what is right and humbly confesses his sins, has clout with his father. He so honors his father's wisdom and goodness by following His ways that the Father feels compelled by His own honor to grant His child's requests. And besides that, He knows that whatever He gives His child will be an investment in righteousness and love.

In the first chapter of Isaiah, verses 15-18, God speaks to His wayward people Israel and says,

When you spread forth your hands I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Is there anyone here who conducts his business in a way that takes advantage of people, that deceives or exploits others? Is there anyone here whose investments or procedures oppress and gouge the fatherless, the widow, the poor or any disadvantaged people? If so,

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God's word to you is, "Even though you make many prayers I will not listen." Christian, the answer to your prayers may depend on where your money is invested and how you do your business.

Two hundred years before Isaiah's time God said to Solomon "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and *turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven* and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). And the Psalmist confirmed in his personal experience (Psalm 66:17-19): "I cried aloud to God, and He was extolled with my tongue. *If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.* But truly God has listened; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer."

Therefore, we find it taught in the Old and New Testaments that if a child has certain bad attitudes and misbehaves, a good father will not give him everything he asks for. In order to have our prayers answered we must be obedient children.

Now, there are two possible misunderstandings of this teaching which would be detrimental to the joy of our faith and which would belittle God's mercy. It would be a mistake, first of all, to conclude that one must be sinlessly perfect in order to have one's prayers answered. There is a difference between being an obedient child and being a perfect child. At the heart of the prayer which Jesus taught us to pray is the petition, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (Matthew 6:12). And since Jesus expects us to say each day, "Give us this day our daily bread," then surely He intends for us to pray the next phrase each day, also: "Forgive us our sins." In other words, Jesus did not anticipate that his disciples would ever get beyond the need for this petition in this life. And since He taught us to pray for forgiveness for our sins, it would be a contradiction to say our prayers can only be answered if we commit no sin.

The righteous person whose prayers have great power is not a sinless person but a repentant person. It is not the person who falls into sin, but the person who stays there whose prayers the Lord is slow to answer. It is not the person who fights against temptation and now and then loses, but the person who is content in his spiritual mediocrity and does not war against his own lethargy. So never say that God demands perfection before He will answer your prayers.

The second misunderstanding of this teaching would be that, since God is inclined to answer the prayers of obedient children, therefore this obedience merits or deserves the blessing of answered prayer. But this would go against everything I said at the beginning about how the death of Christ purchased all our answers to prayer so that we could have them freely. The way to picture the importance of obedience is something like this. None of us is a child of God by nature. We are by nature children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). But by His great mercy and due to no merit in us, God has adopted us into His eternal family and put the seed of His own nature within us. Therefore, all good behavior in God's family is a response to this mercy. All true obedience grows out of faith in the Father's power and goodness and wisdom. The only reason to disobey is that we don't trust that his advice is best for us. So all disobedience grows out of distrust of God and all obedience follows from trust in God. But trusting in mercy is not the same as meriting or deserving. Merit looks at itself and the value it brings to God. Trust looks at God and the value of His mercy. Since all true obedience comes from this sort of trust in God it cannot be said to merit or deserve God's answers to prayer. God answers the prayers of the obedient because He delights so much in

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being honored by the faith from which that obedience springs. Therefore, never say, "My obedience has merited an answer to prayer."

If we avoid these two errors, perfectionism and legalism, then the teaching stands: in the words of John 9:31,

We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, God listens to him.

It seems to me that the application of this teaching is plain: when Jesus commands us to ask and receive, seek and find, knock and have the door opened, He is commanding us not only to pray but also to *live* like sons of a merciful father ought to live. Let the words of God abide in you; cherish no iniquity in your heart; love your fellow believers and do good to all; forsake oppression, confess your sins. If you walk in the light, as He is in the light, there will be confident communion and great answers to prayer. What is this confidence? How confident do you have to be that your prayer will be answered? That is what I will talk about two weeks from today.

What Do Answers to Prayer Depend On? Part Two

John Piper

Two weeks ago I posed the question, "What do answers to prayer depend on?" The first and most fundamental part of the answer was that all answers to prayer depend on the death of Christ for our sins. The reason that a just and holy God is free to bless us with answers to prayer, even though we are sinners who deserve condemnation, is that Jesus Christ died for our sins and turned away the wrath of God from us. Everything beneficial, which fallen human beings have ever experienced, was purchased at Calvary. And therefore, all answers to prayer are free gifts based on God's mercy. We do not purchase answers to prayer by anything we say or do; we only plead for the overflow of mercy already purchased by the sacrifice of our Lord.

The second part of the answer to the question, "What do answers to prayer depend on?" was that they depend on our being obedient children. I argued from numerous Old and New Testament texts that our heavenly Father would bring disgrace upon His own word and harm His children if He gave us whatever we asked for even while we were going on in some sin. I stressed that this does not mean we must be sinlessly perfect in order to have our prayers answered because then the prayer, "Forgive us our sins" would be a self-contradiction. You can't pray for your sins to be forgiven each day if you have to be free from all sin in order to have your prayers answered. And Jesus did teach us to pray that our sins be forgiven (Matthew 6:12). There is a difference between a perfect child and one who is characteristically obedient but not perfect. We must not presume to think that we can get God to do whatever we want if our hearts are not set on doing what He wants (1 John 3:22; James 5:16; John 15:7; 9:31; Psalm 66:16-19; Proverbs 15:29; Isaiah 1:15, etc.).

Today I want to try to give two final answers to the question, "What do answers to prayer depend on?" The text that I have tried hardest to understand in preparation for this message is Mark 11:22-25. It has been by meditating on this text in connection with many others that the final two answers to our question have forced themselves on me.

And Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God.' Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your father also who is in heaven may forgive your trespasses.

The two words in this text which demand clarification are the words "whatever" in verse 24 and "believe" in verses 23 and 24. When Jesus says, "Whatever you ask" does He mean we can ask for absolutely anything? Are there no restrictions? Do answers to prayer not depend at all on what we ask for? And when Jesus says that we must not doubt but believe that what we say will come to pass, does He mean that, in order to have our prayers answered

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we must have undoubting faith that God will give us the very thing we ask? In other words, in what sense do answers to prayer depend on faith?

Let's start with the word "whatever" in verse 24, "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours." It sounds absolute and all-inclusive. But there are three reasons why we should not think Jesus intended to give a blank check to us. The first has to do with the nature of language. The second has to do with the other teachings in the New Testament. The third has to do with the immediate context.

The nature of language is such that all words get their meaning from their usage. Therefore, the usual meaning of a word is determined by its usual usage in our culture. And the particular meaning of a word in a particular text is determined by its particular usage by a particular author. I used to illustrate this when I taught at Bethel by coming into class and asking, "Is everybody here?" Then, if someone said, "Yes," I would say something irritating like, "Well, then, where is Jimmy Carter?" And it wouldn't take long to illustrate that the word "everybody" may or not have an absolute all-inclusive meaning depending on the way it is used in a particular context. That's the way it is with the term "whatever" in Mark 11:24. It may or may not be absolute and all-inclusive. If you were invited out to eat and you sat down at the table and said, "I'll eat whatever you have," no one would offer you a pencil to eat or a straw basket or a shoe. They would know that "whatever" meant "whatever you are serving for dinner." So the meaning of "whatever" in Mark 11:24 can't be settled simply looking at the word. We must look at the context to see if Jesus put any limits on it.

The reason I even stopped to think about whether "whatever" was all-inclusive is that there are texts elsewhere in scripture which teach that there are things we won't get even if we ask for them. I'll mention two such texts. James 4:2,3 says, "You do not have because you do not ask, you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." If James is right, then the "whatever" of Mark 11:24 has to be qualified: You won't get whatever you ask for no matter how much you believe you will, if what you're asking for is simply for your own private satisfaction. Prayers should always be acts of love and so they should always aim not merely at our own satisfaction but also at the benefit of others. 1 John 5:14f. is another text that limits what we can ask for:

This is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.

This is an especially helpful text because the word "whatever" in verse 15 seems to be used just as absolutely as in Mark 11:24. "If we know he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained our requests." But verse 14 makes it crystal clear that "whatever" in verse 15 means "whatever we ask according to God's will." If this is the case in 1 John 5:15, might it not also be the case with Mark 11:24? Does the immediate context in Mark 11 demand a limitation on the meaning of "whatever" in Mark 11:24 similar to the way 1 John 5:14 limited the meaning of "whatever" in 1 John 5:15?

I think it does. Mark 11:25, the very next verse, says,

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone;
so that your father in heaven may forgive your trespasses.

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This verse demands that the promise of verse 24 be limited. It shows that when Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you received it and it will be yours," he did not mean you could pray for vengeance to come on all your enemies. The very next verse says, "When you stand praying, forgive." Therefore, the "whatever" of verse 24 must at least exclude a prayer for vengeance. What this means is that there is no contradiction between Jesus on the one hand and James and John on the other. All agree that God does not promise that absolutely everything we ask for will be given to us if we can just believe that it will.

Therefore, in answer to our old question, "What do answers to prayer depend on?" I would say, they depend on asking for the right things. 1 John 5:14 is the most explicit text on this matter, "If we ask anything according to his will he hears us." The right things to ask for are things that accord with God's will. When Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours," he meant whatever you ask that accords with God's will, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.

Now that brings us to the second word in Mark 11:23 and 24 which needs to be clarified, namely, the word "believe," "Believe that you have received it and it will be yours." Or, as verse 23 says, "whoever does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him." The crucial question that rises out of such statements is, "How is such undoubting faith possible?" The only answer I can think of is that such undoubting faith is only possible if we know what God intends to do for those who believe. Or to put it another way, we can have undoubting faith if we know what God's will is in a particular situation. How can you keep from doubting if you don't know what God intends to do? How can anyone have assurance that the answer to his prayer will come to pass if he is not first assured that this is what God intends to do in response to his faith? There has to be a basis for faith; you can't just will to have no doubts if you are not sure that what you are asking for is what God intends to do.

I have had the flu all week. But I have not been able to pray for healing with undoubting faith that it will happen. The reason is that I do not know the will of God in regard to my health. It may be that He intends for me to be sick for two weeks that I might learn to rely not on myself but on God who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:9). And since I don't know what God intends to do about my health it is impossible to have complete confidence that He will heal me when I ask Him. In such cases we must always say, "nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done" (Mark 14:36).

I hope with this teaching to alleviate a lot of unnecessary guilt. How often we berate ourselves that we cannot ask for certain things with complete confidence that God will give them! But if we do not *know* that God intends to give them, how then can we have complete confidence that He will? Whenever we are forced to say, "Yet, not my will but Thine be done," we are admitting that we have no certainty about whether our specific request will be granted. And there is no reason to feel guilty about that because faith that has no doubts is only possible where we know at least in general what God intends to do for us.

The question that cries out to be answered, therefore, is: "How can we know what God wills to do in response to prayer, so that we can ask Him and trust Him for it?" How do we find out what God intends to do in response to faith? There are two answers; one is that God reveals much of what He intends to do through the scripture; the other answer is that God can reveal His intention apart from scripture privately to an individual or group.

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What I mean by this second answer is that when Scripture does not give a promise that a particular blessing will definitely be given in answer to prayer, God may make known in some other way that He intends to give the blessing. I mention this with some hesitancy because I have never in my life experienced it. God has never communicated to me what He intends to do any other way than by the Scripture. But I think He could and so I will leave open this possibility of how we can find out what God aims to do in response to faith.

The more usual way we discover what God wills to do is by reading his revealed word in the Bible. I would like to mention four teachings from the Bible which show us what God intends to do for those who believe, and which, therefore, will help us have undoubting faith as we pray for these things. First, God promises to save all who call upon Him. Romans 10:13, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Therefore, we need have no doubts that God intends to save us if we really want Him to. Our prayer to Him for salvation should be like the prayer described in Mark 11:24: "Believe that you have received it and it will be yours." God's specific promise in the Scripture sets to rest the doubts and uncertainties about whether God intends to save those who ask Him.

A second teaching of Scripture which will enable us to pray confidently is that God intends to sanctify those whom He has redeemed. That is, if we have called upon God for salvation, we may now be confident that He will answer our prayer for sanctification. Sanctification is that process by which God makes us into the image of Christ, the process of becoming more holy, more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, etc. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Strive for peace with all men and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." But since it is God's intention not to lose any of His children (John 10:28), therefore we know that He will see to it that they all achieve this holiness. Romans 6:22 says, "Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life." Sanctification is a necessary stage on the way to eternal life, and therefore, God intends just as surely to give us sanctification as He does to give us eternal life. So we who are trusting God for eternal life can pray for our own sanctification without any doubt that God will hear and answer our prayer. We have learned from the scripture that this is God's sure intention.

A third teaching of Scripture is that if we will seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, the necessities of our life will be supplied (Matthew 6:33). Or as Philippians 4:19 puts it, "My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Of course, what you perceive your needs to be will depend on your goals. If your goal is to get to New Orleans by 6:00 this afternoon you need to take a plane. If your goal is to run a marathon you need to practice daily at long distances. What goal determines Paul's understanding of need? I think he would say doing the will of God, glorifying Christ. So the promise is not for guaranteed prosperity. In fact, Paul says in Philippians 4:12, "I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want." The promise is that God will supply us with all we need to keep on doing His will and glorifying Him. Therefore, when we pray that our needs be met in this sense we need have no doubts at all that God will answer because Scripture makes plain that is what He intends to do.

I want to look at one more Biblical teaching with you that should enable us to pray at all times without doubting. The teaching is that "in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." This is the greatest and most far-reaching of all the promises in the Bible. The effect it has on prayer is tremendous. It means that when our specific requests are denied God is preparing something better for us. He

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never stops working for the best interests of His children. And therefore, in every prayer we pray we can have complete and undoubting confidence in this, 'God will give me what is best for me in response to my prayer. Don't ever doubt that.

Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, For whoever would draw near to God (cf. 4:16) must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him." The faith which pleases God in prayer is confident of two things, that God is and that He rewards those who seek Him. When we go to God in prayer we must believe that He will bless us, otherwise we displease Him. And we can believe He will bless us because He has promised to work in all things for our great good and to rejoice over us to do us good (Jeremiah 32:40,41).

Many of our prayers will be for things we do not know to be God's will. So we will whisper, "Yet, not my will but Thine be done." And we will believe, on the basis of Romans 8:28, that if our specific request is denied it is because God is preparing something better for us. This fits so well with Matthew 7:9-11,

What man of you, if his son asks of him bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish will give him a serpent? If you, then, who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

That is what God will always give in response to our prayers - good things. "No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly." If God denies our bread or our fish it is not to give us a stone or a serpent, but cake and steak.

When my one year old Abraham sees a shiny kitchen knife and wants to have it, I will pervert his attention from it to a big green can filled with clothespins and show him how much fun they are. Have I answered his prayer? No, I haven't given the specific thing he asked for, but, yes, I did answer his longing to have a good time playing with something.

Day before yesterday we opened a box of oatmeal cookies for dessert and they were moldy, so I started to throw them all away. But Benjamin started to cry and say, "I saw one that didn't have any fuzz on it." But I said, "Benjamin, the mold starts to grow before you can see it, and it can make you sick. Let's have gorp instead." So we did, but Benjamin felt like he was definitely getting second best. And that's the way we often feel when some of our specific requests are turned down. We think God is giving us second best. But He is not. To those who love Him and are called according to His purpose He always gives what is best for them. Therefore, when we pray we may always have undoubting faith that God will give us what is best for us.

In summary, then, when Jesus says in Mark 11:24, "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours," we understand "whatever" to mean "whatever accords with God's will" (1 John 5:14). And we understand that undoubting faith is only possible where God reveals what He wills to do in response to faith. And we understand that in the Scripture God has revealed His intention to save, sanctify, and supply the material needs of those who call upon him. And finally, the greatest promise of all revealed in Scripture is that God will work in everything together for our good. And this means that even though we may have doubts that many of our specific requests will be granted, yet we need have no doubt at all that God will always give us what is best for us.

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Part II: Doing– Ephesians 4:1–6:23

Lesson 8– Move on to Maturity Part I

Ephesians 4:1-16

***Context:** Paul takes a major turn starting in Ephesians 4. Do you see the transition word again? 'THEREFORE', this time in light of all of Chapters 1-3, "I urge you to walk in a manner worthy". Chapters 4-6 focus on this statement, "walk in a manner worthy". If you were to call the first three chapters 'Being', now the second 3 chapters are 'Doing'. What should we do with this new identity before God? However, you must keep 4-6 couched in the context of 1-3. The heart behind right living has everything to do with the gracious life given to us by our Father. The two cannot be divorced and you must be careful not to separate the two. Continually go back to the motivation taught and re-taught in the beginning section. That is the danger of reading a letter over many weeks. A letter is meant to be read in its entirety in one sitting so that the context remains intact. But as you spread out the book over the weeks of a small group, your task must be to retain its original shape. Continue to remember the theme and continue to put the two halves together.

HOOK:

Ask:

- How would you summarize chapters 1-3 at this point?
- In this section we will move onto living out what we have learned thus far. How would you summarize the motivation to follow Christ that Paul has taught so far?

Read the Section: Ephesians 4:1-16

LOOK:

Freedom in Submission- Ephesians 4:1

1. Why does Paul call himself a 'Prisoner for the Lord'? Answer: Because he was writing from prison! But what other connotations does this statement have built into it? How is the status of 'prisoner' relevant to all Christians including us?

**As Christians we are to live in submission to God. We are prisoners of His! We are to die to ourselves and live to Him. This is radical and not easily heard in our culture. The irony is that we*

will never be free will we die! If we long to be free, we live for freedom and are thus trapped and in bondage to freedom in the end. The only way to be truly free, is to submit to the creator who has the ability to give you back your freedom for which you were originally created!

2. Read Galatians 2:19-21, Philippians 3:7-11- What things are we dead to; what have we left behind? How do we die to ourselves?

This is complicated. How do we give up our selves, but maintain that we are a real person, with real desires, with a real personality....? God created us in His image and as such we are created originally 'good'. But because we have fallen through Adam and Eve's original sin we are all marred and in need of restoration. Part of that restoration is taking off the 'old' corrupted part of our nature and putting 'on' the new, as Eph 4 will later talk about. So dying to our selves means adopting God's priorities, His heart, and His desires over our fallen selfish desires that have supplanted the original 'goodness' with which we were intended to live.

3. In light of the theme of "submission" to God, what is the difference between "Savior" and "Lord" when we talk about making God those things in our lives?

**I heard a story of a pastor who while inviting people to trust Christ, welcomed them to make Jesus their Savior and they could deal with the Lord part later! That is not a Biblical view of being a Christian. Jesus is both our Savior and Lord. The two cannot be separated. It seems in our culture, we want the insurance of a 'savior' but don't want the authority of a 'lord' in our lives. Jesus demands that we allow Him to be Lord of our lives in every area. That Lordship will grow over time, but our willingness to relinquish control of our lives is the mark of a true saving response to God.*

4. What is our motivation to want Him to take that place in our lives?

Walk in a Manner Worthy- Ephesians 4:2-16

1. Put some clothes on the phrase, "walk in a manner worthy". How are we to walk in a manner worthy according to this passage?

Walking in a manner worthy according to Paul has a lot to do with how we relate to other people in relationship. Remember the theme again...unity between Jew and Gentile...don't forget the larger context. You will see it again and again in the next 2 chapters. The verses coming are an extended exposition of what it means to walk in a manner worthy. They are all about what it means to walk with God closely in response to His love and grace of chapters 1-3. Or yet another way to say it they are about what it means to "walk in the Spirit". Wives, Husbands, Children, Masters, fellow believers, non-Christians, he will deal with all these relationships in light of walking in a manner worthy. Sometimes it is hard to evaluate how we are doing in our relationship with God. Paul says you can tell how your relationship with Him is going by looking at how you bear with others and maintain unity!

2. Look at the words relational words and phrases: Humility, Gentleness, Patience, Bearing with one-another, Eager to maintain unity- try to put meaning and definition to each.

3. Paul can't go very far with exhortation before throwing in some more motivation. What is the motivation in this section to live in unity by walking in a manner worth?

There is one body! One spirit. One Lord and one baptism. There are not different religions for different people. There are not a higher and lower set of Christians. There are not those that are in and those that are out. There are not those that are on a higher more spiritual plane than others. Back to "predestination"... we have all been chosen by God and he is the author and perfecter of our faith.

Paul uses a set of confusing phrases here as he moves on to talk about different spiritual gifts that people have. "He who descended/ascended" is Christ as he descended to live on earth as a sacrifice and then ascended to heaven and gave gifts (spiritual gifts for ministry purposes) as he left this earth.

4. What's the danger of NOT "walking in a manner worthy"? "So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." (Ephesians 4:14) Do you have a sense of what that means or could look like in a person's life?

5. Vs. 15- "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in Christ". This is powerful and challenging. What does it mean? What would it look like in healthy relationships?

***Notebooks:** Can I ask you to be a bit introspective and even vulnerable with each other? First you have to be ready to be vulnerable with yourself! Are you walking in a manner worthy? Why or why not? As you look at the inside of who you are, what is it about how you view Christ that has lead you to where you are now....walking or not walking...?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

Assignment:

- Spend time with God and ask Him to reveal areas of your life that are not 'walking in a manner worthy'.
- Study the words *Humility*, *Gentleness*, *Patience*...what do they really mean and how do you need to apply them? (use a concordance (BibleGateway.com) and look up other instances of the Bible's use of the words. Look them up in a dictionary. Compare, contrast, and try to internalize the words.
- Write a summary of chapters 1-3 in your own words.

Suggested Reading and Resources: Don't Waste Your Life, John Piper; Humility, Andrew Murray; The Mortification of Sin, by John Owen

Lesson 9– Move on to Maturity Part II

Ephesians 4:17-24

HOOK:

***Context:** I love this section. It has taught me and shaped me a lot. There is a profound transition that happens between the two groups of people and Paul is clear on what leads to their life change. At one level he talks about what brings someone to a saving relationship with Jesus. On another level he tells us how to keep growing once we are true Christians.

Ask:

- How do Christians grow? What moves someone from immaturity to maturity in Christ? What are some key principles?
- What are the main factors that have caused growth in your Christian life?.

Read the Section: Ephesians 4:17-24

LOOK:

Changed Minds and Hearts

1. What is the difference between the first group of people and the second? What has been the process of their transformation? *Are there any repeated words or themes in the passage that give us a clue?*

“Minds”, “knowledge”, “know”, “heard”, “ignorance”- something was true of what they believed, what they thought, what is in their heads. Then something came in and radically changed their belief system. We have made an issue of head knowledge sinking to our hearts in previous lessons but Paul brings us back and highlights the role of our minds. We are not to neglect the power of what happens on a belief level in the head. He does not negate what he told us about heart knowledge, but he shows us that what we think and believe is still of vital importance in growth.

2. What is the interplay between the following in the circular diagram below? What influences the other? Which comes first, second and so on? Where do you find each area in the passage?

The mind seems to be the root, but it is closely tied to the heart. So which comes first, a renewed mind and then a renewed heart? Or does the heart have to be renewed before the mind. Perhaps ‘yes’. That is, perhaps both are true. There is a constant interplay between the mind and the heart and we must not forget that both are involved in growth. It then seems apparent that sin stems from a wrong heart and mind, but then feeds back into tainting our mind and hearts. Fill out the diagram below with arrows showing which area leads to affect the other.

**note: it seems like this passage focuses on the need to have right input into our minds, but the arrows I believe should go back and forth between all the areas showing that they all affect one-another.*

- Which area leads to the next? Draw Arrows. What is the root?

Heart

Put on New

Minds

Put Off Sin

- Have we previously seen mind and hearts in Ephesians? How are they related?

3. Let me ask it in a similar but different way? Why do our hearts go astray? What are the ultimate desires of your heart that tend to lead you astray?

Idolatry- it has been noted that idolatry is the root of all sin. Remember back to Adam and Eve? They ate the apple. What was so bad about that? What was the real thing going on there? Freedom was their idol at the root. They didn't want to have to rely on God. They wanted the 'knowledge of good and evil' just like God had so that they could be independent and free of God's control. Do you see it? It is not just disobeying God, but the heart root. We are all idolaters. Not many of us have a physical shrine to a foreign god, but our hearts are idol factories. At the center is some form of SELF. But each of us has different ways in which our idolatry takes shape. For me it often manifests itself in insecurity. I take control of my own identity and think that I am what I make myself to be and not who God says that I am. Therefore I try to please people around me so that they like me, or even more specifically, so that they respect me. Respect and approval are my idols by which I try to heal my insecurity, which is an idol of SELF-worship. You may see me boasting, talking about things that I don't know that much about but pretending I do, criticizing others through sarcasm, but the real sin is idolatry. Unless I deal with the root issue, I will never move on to maturity!

***Notebooks:** What are your idols?

4. **Read: Romans 12:1-2-** What are the steps of action take Paul admonishes in this passage?

5. What is the ultimate result of this passage?

Able to discern God's will, able to live pleasing to God, able to live the 'perfect' life. Aren't those the things we all want?

6. How do we renew our minds? What is the motivation? How do we do it practically?

Look closely at the passage. It is easy to talk practical discipline at this point and you should be encouraged to take some steps in that area. But Paul deals with more here than just the discipline aspect. He uses phrases like, 'spiritual act of worship', 'in view of God's mercy'. Our motivation again is all-important. It is worship to renew our minds. Worship is not just singing on Sunday morn, it is shaping our minds and hearts to be pleasing to Him. If there is no desire to renew your mind, there is no real desire for worship...there may be no real desire for Christ!

7. Let's list some potential Practical Steps of Renewing the Mind

- 1) Regular schedule of spending devoted times with God
- 2) What a Quiet Time? What do people do for their times?
- 3) Prayer
- 4) Fellowship
- 5) Find Good Teaching

8. Look back at verses 20-23, where does our effort take place and where does His power come in?

Don't get the application of this series on Ephesians wrong. There is work to do in the Christian life. We are to 'work out our salvation'. We are to 'labor with all His energy'. The bumper sticker 'let go and let god' has it wrong! Remembering the context of the "Gospel". It is where our motivation comes from. We are to be disciplined to 'put off' the old. But then look at the verb tense of the next sentence- "To BE RENEWED in the spirit of your minds". This sentence is passive. We have our part and it is hard work indeed, but God is active in the process, very active. He renews our minds as we obey in discipline. As he renews our minds, we set out to respond in the freedom of discipline even more fully and in turn the cycle continues and our minds are once again more renewed. The process of growth continues our whole lives. In fact as I grow I now experience the reality of the depth of my sin and idolatry towards God more and more rather than less and less as he renews my mind to see it. But because of the Gospel I can continue on in security and confidence knowing that my heart on another level is experiencing Christ more and more in freedom and joy.

There is also another positive principle to follow- "put on the new". It is the replacement principle. Nicorette has the right idea. It is a biblical idea really. They know that as soon as you take away cigarettes a void is created, you can't just stop w/o replacing the void. So they give you a nicotine gum to curb the original craving. Of course then you get addicted to the gum, which seems pretty lame to me. That is where the analogy may break down here. In this passage Paul is telling us that to put off sin and be renewed in our minds is only part of the solution. Next is to put on the new so that the old doesn't creep back to take its place.

What righteous purpose will replace the idolatry? Perhaps serving others instead of serving yourself...you get the picture.

9. What are your thoughts about the preceding paragraphs? Are there practical applications for you at this point in putting off or putting on?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

Assignment:

- Listen to 'Continuous Worship: Idolatry by Mark Driscoll at:
http://theresurgence.com/mark_driscoll_2007-09-17_cw_audio_worship_and_idolatry
- Write a prayer to God expressing gratitude for how your heart has changed since you began your new relationship.
- Determine some goals and prayer steps for renewing your mind.
- Re-read Eph 1-4:24, summarize each section verbally next week.

Suggested Reading: Pursuit of Holiness, Jerry Bridges; Desiring God, John Piper; Pursuit of God, A.W. Tozer

Lesson 10– The New Self

Ephesians 4:25-5:20

HOOK:

***Context:** ‘Encounter and Respond’, this is the section where the theme of Cru at UNC comes from. Eph 1-3 was the encounter, now here is the response. Only in light of the encounter can we really respond. This section of scripture is a long one with a lot of morals to follow. But it means nothing without the context of Chapter 3. It is just “moralism” of which most religions preach if we don’t attach the first section to it. In fact, it is actually impossible to follow w/o Christ. Sure it may be possible to fake it somewhat on the outside, but what about the heart level that we have talked about so often? Christ cannot only change the outside, but he can also change the heart from which all actions flow! Ultimately we strive for these things in this section to please Christ! Not to be more moral, or feel better about ourselves. But because we believe the Gospel- all that Christ has done and is doing for us and in gratitude we want to please Him.

Ask:

- What does it mean to live as a Christian? What has Ephesians told us so far?
- We have not dealt with too many rules or moral ethics so far in this study. What are things that you know that God wants us to obey that come into conflict with culture ideals?

Read the Section: Ephesians 4:25-5:20

LOOK:

The New Qualities- Ephesians 4:25-5:14

“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ us and gave Himself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

1. List qualities of the “New Self” from the passage. What are some categories that you could come up with?

2. If God has accepted us and adopted us already, why do we need to strive for these things?

If we truly are accepted and adopted why would we not need to strive for these things? Romans would tell us that we have submitted to a new master, how could we still live for the old master? If God is good and right and true and created us, wouldn’t he want what is best for us and know what is best for us? How could we do any other thing than follow Him? We now obey not to get God, but to thank God. But we also follow God for our own good! It is what is best, right and true.

From Lesson 3 and worth re-reading and keeping in tension with this current section: Puritan Pastor John Owen says efforts to stop sin that come from "convictions of the law" will only temporarily stop "particular sins", but those who seek to weaken sin "by the Spirit of the Gospel" will change the whole person- mind will and affections. Owen is saying here that mortification (killing sin) arising from only the convictions of the law- that is from a belief that we can "save ourselves" through our own efforts- cannot really change the sinful heart. It can only squelch behavior temporarily through external pressure. It is the truths of the gospel- Jesus' dying love, his unconditional commitment to us, his costly sacrifice, and our adoption into God's family- that makes the sin itself hateful in our eyes. This God-centered way of confessing and forsaking sin is a powerful instrument of change. Fear of consequences changes behavior through external coercion- the inner impulses remain. However a desire to please and honor the one who saved you and who is worthy of all praise- that changes you from the inside out. Tim Keller, Prayer pg. 217

3. What are some categories of sin of the "Old Life"?
4. Think about a tree and its roots. The fruit or lack of is what you see on the outside. But deep down is where all the action is taking place. What is the root behind each category of "the old life"?
5. Are there specific areas that are tough for you?
6. What is the motivation to live these qualities out that Paul gives? What are potential *wrong* motivations to live out the "new life"? Be honest and introspective. We all do the right things for the wrong reasons at times.... Maybe a lot of times.

The New Master- Ephesians 5:15-21

1. What's the context of why 'drinking' is mentioned here?

It's a section about worship. Living wisely in God's Kingdom. It's about addressing one another with pure praise and healthiness. This gives insight into why alcohol is used as an example of "not walking with the Spirit". It is about submission and who is in control. If alcohol is the influence in your life, then God cannot be. However this verse is not about 'drinking' per se. Paul could have put any 'idol' in its place. Perhaps it could say 'do not love the praise of others, for that is a waste of time (debauchery)', or 'do not think you are more holy because you don't drink, for that is a waste of time'. As now, alcohol has throughout history been a device that people have used to take their minds off of their current circumstances. It is a substance that diverts attention away from what is real and gives temporary reprieve. The bigger issue whether it is alcohol or any other person, place or things, is the object of our affection. What takes our

affection in place of the Spirit in our lives? The point is to reflect on what shapes us and who is our functional master. Who or what do we worship? What is the controlling object even emotion of your life?

2. According to context of Eph 5:18- what does it mean to be “filled by the spirit”?

To be ‘filled by the Spirit’ is to be controlled not by the world and its idols, drinking to the point of drunkenness in this case, but to be controlled by the Spirit of God. It means to be listening to his voice and following his goodness and wisdom and not pursuing the ‘apple in Adam and Eve’s eye’! It means to not waste your time and your life, but pursue what is eternal and lasting and good.

3. Look back at **Genesis 3:1-7**- What were the functional “saviors” or “idols” that the serpent appealed to? Do you relate to any?

Commentators have noted that the original sin was instigated through Satan appealing to the things that still tempt our hearts today. Human nature has always been susceptible to idols of the heart. For Eve, they were: autonomy, knowledge, sustenance, and beauty. For Adam they were: apathy and non-action.

If Satan approached the first man and woman with these temptations, don’t you think he would be wise enough to continue to pull at our hearts? He is smart enough not to worry about our actions, but rather go after the real deep stuff, the heart motivations.

4. What functionally fills your life? What controls you? This is the application question again... you can get by with a simple answer, or you can really be real and vulnerable and let others and God into your life. What are you filled by? When do you tend to be filled by other things than God? (ie. lonely times, frustrating times, sad times?) What voices do you listen to most? Why is it that Christ does not fill you?

5. Verses 19-20 also give the antidote to filling our lives with meaningless things. If, instead we give thanks to God for all that he is and what he has done, we will not have a focus on things that don’t matter. But let’s be serious. You are not going to walk down the street and sing praise songs all the time. What do these verses practically look like?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?

What did you learn about the Character of God?

How should you respond?

Assignment:

- What is your next step in these areas of **"New Self Living"**?
- Do a word study on one of the qualities that you need to develop.
(ie. study 'submit'. Look it up in a dictionary and find a full meaning. Look it up in other passages in the Bible using a concordance. What light does it shed on the usage in this passage? Use biblegateway.com and do a 'word search'. Overall, what insight do you gain as to the fullness of this word's meaning and how it might help you grasp its application?

Suggested Reading: The Mortification of Sin, John Owen; Kingdom of Couches, Will Walker; Religious Affections, Jonathan Edwards; Searching for God Knows What, Donald Miller

Lesson 11 – Relationships in Christ

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

HOOK:

***Context:** Two themes seem to be incorporated here, one imbedded in the other. The overall theme of Ephesians is unity right? Well, unity then is lived out in relationships of which this section highlights the primary ones of the day. Secondly, the teaching of 'walking in the Spirit' is theoretical unless we apply it to real relationships. God intended relationships for us. He is a relational God and has always been in the Trinity. The trinity is the model for us...perfect love and unity and it can only be accomplished through life in the Spirit- God liberating us from our selfish desires to respond to Him in worship so that his priorities and in fact his very life is lived out in our lives and in the church.

Ask:

- Submission- what's the deal here? Isn't this outdated right wing fundamentalist stuff you see on TV? Respond to what you feel when you first read this section?
- Why do you feel the way you do? What do you agree with and what rubs you wrongly?
- Now, suspend judgment and work through the passage together.

Read the Section: Ephesians 5:21-6:9

LOOK:

The New Relationships- Ephesians 5:21-6:9

1. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ". Well here we are at some controversy! Paul really stirs it up. But far from being a bigot, Paul's view of women is quite radical particularly in his day and age. He truly has a high view of women I believe as often comes out in his language affirming women of whom he knows personally. Let's first begin by focusing on the above verse, vs. 21. Why did I start this section here?

This section should really start with verse 21, not verse 22 if your Bible is arranged that way. The context of all the submission to one-another relationships is in submission to Christ. We submit to Him firstly in response and thus submit to one-another in light of his model and calling. This can be a tricky section due to the women and slaves issues. But note again that the context is submission to Christ and he is asking us therefore to submit to others.

Furthermore, if you look at the Husbands/Wives passage, notice to whom the bulk of exhortation is given... It is really to the men, to love their wives in a way that brings about the submission of the wives. In our culture we think of submission as the inferior weak position, but in the mind of Christ, it is the strong who submit in response to love. Submission is not the lesser of the two, but the mature response.

2. What are the relational difficulties of each of the three relationships Paul addresses? What are the joys that each relationship makes available? In other words, address each of the relationships and talk about the ups and downs that you have seen or experienced in those types of relationships.

- Husbands and Wives

Please note. Most of you have not experienced this relationship and it is NOT transferable to dating or other guy/girl relationships! So don't create a false bridge to some other relationship.

Secondly, men must repent if they have used these words from Paul to subjugate women. That is not his intention and there have been many evils done using these verses as a scapegoat. Men have the idol of longing for respect. Paul reveals that in this passage. As such, men from a position of physical power have forced women to meet their idol verbally and physically in incredibly abusive ways. Those in power positions will always subjugate those of weaker positions without the Gospel intervening. (In this case I mean physical strength, which is of course not to say that all men are stronger than all women physically, but most of the time this is the case).

Thirdly, notice the brunt of Paul's exhortation. It is not to the woman, but to the man. He spends 3 verses talking to the wife, and 8 verses talking to the man. The extent of the conversation to the man is to love his wife. He is to treat her like Christ would treat her. He is NOT to dominate her. He is to value her as his very own body. Can I ask which of you women readers would not love to graciously submit to a man like this? And when I say submit, I do not mean grovel and beg. I mean when there is disagreement and someone must break the tie, there has to be one that is given that position. No company on the NYSE would work without a deciding vote. When that would come into play, I don't really even know. It has never in my marriage.

Finally, a place of submission, in God's economy is not a lower, less mature position. It is always a higher, more mature position! Who else famously submitted? Jesus Christ himself! Jesus submitted to the will of the Father. Jesus was a "Helper" as the woman is called in Genesis. It is not a "helper" in the sense of a secondary laborer, but rather a helper in the sense that you are out of luck without that helper. Without the helper you will fail. The helper is indispensable. Today we have assigned value based on role. In God's economy value is assigned based on identity, which has nothing to do with role.

3. Have you had good and or bad models of marriage relationships lived out in front of you? Describe.

4. In light of our conversations on "idolatry" and "root sins" in this study, what potential dangers do you foresee in a marriage relationship for you?

- Children and Parents

5. This has been the most shaping relationship for most of you so far in your life. What is your family background like? Share with the group some of the ups and downs. Is this exhortation easy or hard for you? Why, why not?

6. There is something special, powerful and also dangerous about family relationships. Especially those between same gender. The father shapes the son in profound ways. So the mother shapes the daughter also. Guys, talk about your relationship with your dads. Girls talk about your relationship with your mother.

- Slaves and Masters

There is quite rightly a lot of emotion tied up in this word. Those from the white majority culture must realize that when using this word, there are deep hurts and wrongs that are real and valid. To know that this verse, wrongly interpreted, by people professing to be Christians is a great stain on the history of the American and British churches. This passage has most certainly been used in support of slavery. We must repent for our forefathers and the sin that we have even perhaps unknowingly inherited.

However a correct interpretation of the word used for slave here is more closely related to an employee today and there is good and healthy application. In ancient times a huge percentage of the population were actually slaves. Perhaps near 70% in Paul's day. Then, slaves meant something more like indentured servants, or bondservants as Paul is sometimes translated. When people owed money and were not able to pay, they would often sell themselves into another's service as payment of the loan. Often, after 7 years they were released from their debt. At this time they could stay on with their 'owner' and work for them for the rest of their lives. They were then marked with a symbol and a 'slave' for the rest of their lives. However, in this situation they were slaves by choice, not by force. It could be a good life at the hand of a good 'boss' in many instances. Thus Paul's use here does not give support to slavery, as we understand slavery today.

7. Most of you will be "slaves" in the sense that Paul means here. Most of you will not rise the ladder the moment you graduate and become a "master" right away. However some of you will someday be "masters" in Paul's sense. Some of you B-School people may have already become masters!? What can you take from Paul's exhortation that might apply to employees and employers?

8. Again, In light of our conversations on "idolatry" and "root sins" in this study, what potential dangers do you foresee in your job relationships for you?

9. Make this practical if it isn't already. In which relationships currently is it difficult for you to "walk in the Spirit"? Why? What idol keeps you from walking in the Spirit in this relationship?

TOOK:

What was most helpful, challenging or thought provoking?
What did you learn about the Character of God?
How should you respond?

Assignment:

- Read "Does Christianity Squash Women?" (Print to follow, or follow the link below. Girls AND guys read this. It is valuable perspective for you both. It is 20 pages long so take a few pages each day this week.)

<http://goo.gl/WTcC4N>

- Write a paragraph on what it means to 'walk in the Spirit' according to Paul in Ephesians. Refer to passages in the text when you can.

Recommended Reading:

Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood, Wayne Grudem and John Piper;
Does Christianity Squash Women?, Rebecca Jones;
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance, Bruce Ware;
Feminine Appeal, Carolyn Mahaney; The Council for Biblical Womanhood and Manhood-
<http://www.cbmw.org/>

Does Christianity Squash Women?

Rebecca Jones

Given at Bryn Mawr College in April,
2000 under the auspices of Greentree
Ministries

In her book, *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*, Danielle Crittenden makes the following statement: "Unfortunately, there is no contemporary model for a marriage in which our modern belief in sexual equality could be reconciled with the inherent differences of our sexual natures." (p.110)

I hope to inspire you this evening by showing you how the Christian faith offers just such a model. By providing the transcendent marriage relationship of everlasting love between God the Creator/Redeemer and His people (the heavenly marriage which is the climax of redemptive history), Christianity provides a taproot into genuine power, lasting love and true freedom and reproduces just such fruits in the marriages of those who belong to Christ.

What Are Women Seeking?

In my own experience with women in the thirty years since I graduated from college, I have found that most of them--whether Christian or atheist, single or married, aged twenty or seventy--long for the same things. In their relationships with men, they want faithful fathers, brothers, husbands and sons who love and respect them, rather than mocking, ignoring, or hurting them. They want fun, but meaningful sexual relationships. In their relationships with women, they want honesty, and true sisterhood, as well as older women who can mentor them. They want the satisfaction of bearing and rearing children well. They want a place to call home--not simply an apartment, but an affectionate, safe "sit by the fire" home where they can be themselves without fear and where others can come to receive something from them. They want a sense of significance, of doing something that really counts in the world. Something only they can offer.

Because some of these desires seem mutually exclusive, women have given up their hopes in one realm in order to explore a path of satisfaction in another. Thinking that freedom from authority structures might give them a sense of individual identity, they have advocated autonomy. Remember Kate Millett's statement in 1970: "Women's autonomy is what women's liberation is all about."¹ Thinking that men needed to learn some things about treating women with respect, they have tried to power them into that behavior. Thinking that they could assert their worth and individuality by affirming their control over their own bodies, they have chosen to claim a right to sexual satisfaction without constraints and to abortion without guilt. Thinking that the best way to bear and rear children is to have fewer children later in life, they have placed career before children, both chronologically

sometimes in terms of value. Thinking that freedom must behead the king, they have stormed the palace of the ultimate Patriarch, the Christian God.² (Take, for example, the statement by Virginia Mollenkott, until recently identified by Christians as an evangelical, "Patriarchy is a profoundly mistaken social system that has caused misery to millions and could yet cause the destruction of human kind and the planet we share together."³)

No one will deny the revolution which women have affected in the last thirty years. I will not list all the changes that have occurred. But where are women now? Are they any happier than they were when I graduated from Wellesley College in 1971, in the middle of the full feminist march to independence?

Has the Sexual Revolution Made Women Happier?

Danielle Crittenden describes her research into this question. "Women today enjoy unprecedented freedom and opportunity," she states.

So why, I'd wondered, were the articles in women's magazines so relentlessly pessimistic? I'd pulled thirty years' worth of back issues of *Mademoiselle*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Redbook*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *McCall's* from the stacks of the Library of Congress. It was partly from reading magazines like these that Betty Friedan had concluded in 1963 that the women of her generation felt unhappy and stifled. A huge social transformation had taken place...Had it made women any happier?...From...a general gauge of mood,...the answer was, resoundingly, no.⁴

According to Crittenden, women today are more likely to be divorced or never married, more likely to bear children out of wedlock, more likely to be junkies or drunks or to die in poverty. They are more likely to shoulder the lion's share of the housework, even if they work outside the home. Her thought-provoking way of stating the problem is to say that thirty years ago too many women were not treated as humans, while today, too many humans are not treated as women. She quotes one frustrated female college student who says about men, "All the men want to do is hook up--and most of them don't even call in the morning....the more casual that women allow their physical relationships with men to become, the less respect they earn. Men don't date us because they don't have to."⁵

As the mother of five daughters, only one of whom has found "her man," I hear a daily critique of today's young men, who float like spineless jellyfish, adrift in a sea of uncertainty, without direction, purpose or courage.

Is it possible to find balanced relations between the sexes? Can a woman find and commit to a man who is neither tyrant nor wimp? Can she find satisfaction in her home without losing a sense of identity in the larger world? Can she rear children without becoming their slave?

Covenant Relationships Satisfy a Woman's Desires

Women can have satisfying relationships. They can discover worth both within and outside of the family. They can hope to create a true home, and to bear children to men who are faithful to them. A happy woman, like a happy man, is a woman whose relationships are grounded in a covenant. I realize that this word is obsolete. In San Diego, it is used to describe a particularly desirable and expensive neighborhood. Everyone dreams of living in "The Covenant." Tonight I would like you to open your thinking to the possibility of living in

The Covenant., an even more desirable and expensive neighborhood than its reflection in San Diego.

A covenant is a contractual agreement between two parties in which each is to fulfill certain responsibilities. Rewards result when the covenant is kept. Consequences occur when the covenant is broken. We enter into covenants constantly. We sign credit card agreements, mortgages, software licenses, educational loans, and our tax returns. Our signature states our promise to abide by certain rules and affirms that we realize the consequences of breaking those rules. Though we sometimes regret having signed certain promises, we are often glad, on the other hand, that our signature guarantees us protection and coverage. Remember the relief you experienced when you went back to the fine print and discovered that your credit card insurance *does* cover that accident you had in the rental car?

Both women and men need covenantal structure if their relationships are to be satisfying. Covenant relationships are based on mutual trust, which is in turn based on commitment.

Covenant Relationships Are Sure

Though human promise is not infallible, it is genuinely valuable. We prize those people in our lives whose word is true. We choose friends who are honest about themselves and about life, even if their honesty sometimes reminds us of our own weaknesses. But honesty is not the only criterion for a promise. For a covenant arrangement to take place, trustworthiness is joined by commitment: "I will be faithful to you until death." A man's trustworthiness is useless to a woman until he makes that promise to her. And his promise is worthless unless it is backed by his trustworthy character.

But here we have a problem. Two human beings cannot promise such fidelity to each other without accepting the notion of sacrifice. A man and a woman who promise fidelity to each other are declaring that self-sacrifice is a necessary element in making another person happy. A covenant promise of faithfulness implies a promise of sacrifice: I will put your needs above my own. Or, as my college motto goes, *non ministrari sed ministrare*. Not to be ministered unto, but to minister. I sometimes tell my children that there is only one argument I would like to hear: "You go first!" "No, you go first!"

Covenant Relationships Are Personal

Promises engage us as individuals. They assume that we are other than rocks and trees. There is a "face to face" notion about vows that recognizes an equal value to each individual and an equally important value to the unit created by the joining of those two individuals. Adam's first reaction to Eve was the Hebrew equivalent of a "Wow!" followed by the "in your face" nature of Eve's relationship to him: "Wow! Surely *this* is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones."

Some personal promises are corporate. Legal contracts can treat a group of individuals as a single person. Communities are bound by the promises their legislators make for them in relation to the state. A class of children can commit with a teacher to presenting a play for the school. In class action lawsuits, individuals share a particular identity in order to present a case. But in the marriage vow, the commitments are made by one individual to another.

Covenant Relationships Involve the Whole Person

The promises made in a covenant marriage structure are such that both body and soul are engaged. For true marital fidelity, these two must be kept together, in order to avoid the

two extremes created when a Gnostic split between the physical and the spiritual is allowed. When such a split occurs, the body can be given over to debauchery (since it is of lesser importance) or controlled by asceticism (which denies bodily joys because the physical is considered evil). True covenant relationship between a man and his wife allows a man to see his wife's physical beauty and rejoice, while also loving her as a person. It allows a woman to absorb the physical attention of her husband without refusing the soul attachment that is linked to it. Spirituality and physicality join for true communion.

Covenant Relationships Are Intimate

Trust allows honesty. Honesty within a couple means that love continues in spite of weak or willfully selfish behavior. The grace necessary in such relationships engenders tenderness and forgiveness which when received, creates a desire to render in kind. When a woman senses that her man knows everything about her and loves her still, she is truly able to experience intimacy. As Lord Peter Wimsey, speaking to his wife Harriet says, in Dorothy Sayers and Jill Pator Walsh's, *Thrones, Dominations*: "You have unmasked me, and loved me all the same." This intimacy is founded on grace and forgiveness.

All of the above elements are impossible to create in one's own strength. An absolutely sure promise can only come from an absolutely honest, absolutely sacrificial person. A truly personal relationship can only be created between two perfect people. A perfectly unity of body and soul can only come from someone who understands and controls both. And true intimacy can only occur between two people who are either perfect, or perfectly able to forgive at all times.

The Christian Gospel is the Only Basis for Covenant

So how can two faithless human beings expect honesty and trust from each other? How can women trust men, after all that men have done to them, whether in history or on a personal level? And how can men trust women not to manipulate them or take advantage of their willingness to be vulnerable?

There is only one source of certainty, of wholeness, of personality, of intimacy. This source is the creative Person who made the world to reflect such qualities, found initially only in the Creator. All humans are capable of covenant because they are made in the image of the One who created them. However, those who rely on the Creator for the strength, humility and love to live out their own marriage covenants (or other human covenantal relationships), will construct stronger bonds than those who are "borrowing" qualities they do not respect or claim as their own.

The Christian understands the fundamental, created order which God has placed in this world, and receives the power to overcome evil, which has twisted that order, making a parody of it. For us to understand the limited covenant a woman makes with a man in marriage, we must understand that such a covenant is only a shadow of a greater Covenant.

The Family Covenant Reflects God the Creator's Nature

Unbreakable--"I Am Who I Am"

God has set up a covenant structure with His creatures. There is a great Cosmological Arrangement, a Contract with the Universe, that carries promises and consequences. Of course, when two human beings enter into an arrangement, they seal it before some court

or authority that will move in to administer justice, should something go wrong. However, God can swear by nothing greater than Himself. As the author to the book of Hebrews says,

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms that is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. (Hebrews 6:16-19)

This unshakable nature of God and His oath, sworn on His own being and name, provides the foundation for the Cosmic Covenant, and serves as the court of justice for all human relationships. Only when we understand and commit to the terms of this greater covenant can we understand the implications of the lesser ones, for they are all intimately related in purpose and function to that universal covenant. Both God's creation and His covenants reflect his character and show us something of who He is.

Separate--Face to Face

In the person of God exists the separateness that we grapple with in the couple. In God the Father is authority, initiating love, creative power, and the origins of compassion. In God the Son is the equal but submissive expression of the Father, "the radiance of the Father's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3). The Son both expresses the Father's glory and receives the Father's glory. The Spirit is the great communicator, the heart-changer, who reveals the nature of God, convicts of sin, shows the beauty of God's righteousness, reveals the truth of God's Word, guides, urges, counsels, conquers, and woos on behalf of the Father and the Son.

The equality of person-ness and the separateness of functions is one of the great beauties and mysteries of the trinity. I do not pretend to wrap my small mind around this infinite treasure, but one thing I know. God created structures in this universe to show us Himself. The separateness and equality of people in a family--the male as husband and father, the female as wife and mother, and children of both sexes as equal reflections of both the mother and the father, yet separate individuals in subjection to their parents--these human relationships, mysterious enough as they are, reflect the greater depth and breadth of love expressed in the fathomless trinity.

United

In that relationship of triune perfection we have the source of infinite love, of absolute communion, of indivisible fidelity, of burning honesty, of intense joy, and ultimate peace. In our society today a great urge for unity sweeps the globe. We all sense that one-ness is necessary if our world is to make sense. In the trinity we find ultimate unity, the basis for our own human unity. Jesus prays to the Father for His disciples, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11). Christians know how to maintain their identity, yet find true unity with one another. And a Christian man and his wife have this foundation laid out for them in their marriage.

God Created Men and Women

I am not implying that by looking at human relationships as God has created them we will be able to understand everything there is to know about the person of God. But God freely offers a great wealth of knowledge about Himself, which He shows us both in His world and in His Word. And we never want to define Him by our understanding. We will find great satisfaction, however, in defining ourselves by His.

Separate

God created men and women to be not only separate individuals, as are two men or two women, but separate kinds of individuals, made to complement one another and to "fit" together, thus reflecting a greater truth about God than any two or more members of the human race could show in any other relationship. Marriage has a special place in God's creation both as an expression of His being, and as an expression of His redemptive plan. In creating such objective differences, God underlines in the very structure of His creation, the one underlying difference we must admit--the separateness of God Himself from His creation.

However, this separateness is not one of isolation or cosmic loneliness. We are made separate, but we are made for communion.

Equal

God creates men and women equal. The Bible is full of evidence of the ontological equality of men and women before the throne. They are both heirs of the covenant of grace, accomplished by Jesus' death and resurrection (Gal. 3:28; 1 Peter 3:7). Both are in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Both answer to God for their own sin. Both receive the Spirit and are made sons of God. Both are commissioned to subdue the earth and to fill it (Gen. 1:28). Both, by faithfully fulfilling their roles of husband and wife, participate in the incarnation of Christ.⁶

Both receive spiritual gifts with which they serve Christ, His church and the world.

In His Image

When we speak of being created in the image of God, we must not define the Creator in terms of the creature. The queen of underland in C. S. Lewis' book, *The Silver Chair*, tries to argue Puddleglum, the Prince, Jill and Scrubb into thinking that underland is the only world there is. The three friends, under the thrumming spell of the queen's music, and the magic power of a powder she has thrown on the fire, struggle to affirm the reality of the sun. "Then came the Witch's voice, cooing softly, "What is this sun that you speak of?...What is it like?"...

"You see that lamp," replies the Prince. "Now that thing which we call the sun is like the lamp, only far greater and brighter." The queen laughs. "When you try to think out clearly what this sun must be, you can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your sun is a dream."⁷

Although created things do give us a hint about God's nature, we cannot create God merely by what we see. We understand that the created structures in which we live, though valid and good, are but a weak reflection of His being. Thus for mankind to be created in the image of God, male and female, is not to say that "God" is both "male and female," some kind of androgynous reflection of human nature. Rather, we must say that both "male and female" reflect something of who God is. God's person-ness is much greater than ours, yet our created, personal nature reflects God's personhood.

For Relationship with Him and with Each Other

We are created for relationship with our Creator first of all, and then also for relationship with other human beings. God is a relational being. Within His own nature He was already communicating, loving, initiating, responding, rejoicing, and experiencing community before human beings ever existed. He did not create man because He was inherently lonely. But when He did create man, He created Him in His image for relationship first of all with Himself, and also with other humans. The first human relationship God created was that of husband and wife. God did not need the vows of the man to the woman or the woman to the man, promising fidelity to each other, though perhaps they made them. He created that first male-female relationship as a *de facto* marriage. Adam's faithfulness to God implied a faithfulness not only to his role of caretaker of creation, but also in his faithfulness to the woman God created. And Eve's faithfulness to God implies a faithfulness to the man already created. We were created already in relationship to God, already in relationship to one another, male and female.

First in their state of perfection and later in their fallen state, God asks of them obedience and promises them His presence.

Relationship in Families

God has set us in families. "Sing to God," says Psalm 68:4ff. "His name is the Lord--a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families and leads forth prisoners with singing." In Ephesians 3:14, the apostle Paul says he "kneels before the Father, from whom all fatherhood derives its name." God has placed family structures in the world not only for our benefit but to show us a shadow of the beauty of the trinity, for in God's person are caught up all the glories of personal relationship, communion, communication, fellowship, love and face-to-faceness.

In Societies

An extension of the order of the family is found in society. Though the structure of the only eternal Kingdom is obviously a theocracy, such an order cannot be imposed politically. Jesus reprimands Peter when he takes up the sword in a vain attempt to establish Christ's rule by use of the sword. I am not a political theorist, but perhaps it is fair to say that the best expressions of the various political structures reflect some aspect of God's rule. Democracy is evidence of the individual value with which God has endowed men. Monarchy reflects the benevolent rule of God, the King of kings. A theistic communism might emphasize the sacrificial kindness that humans ought to be showing to one another. It seems to me that if you put perfect people into any political structure, society would work just fine. I am not competent to think through the implications of the Christian faith in the area of political science. However, God has asked us to be obedient to the authorities insofar as their requests do not require us to disobey God's commands. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Acts 13:1). However, there is a hierarchy of authority structures, and obedience to God comes above all other fidelity: "Peter and the other apostles replied (to the Jewish authorities), "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29).

As a Church

The Redeemed family of God is called His bride. The salvation story is pictured in the book of Hosea, in which God continues to woo His people, though they are unfaithful to Him.

Hosea is called to marry a prostitute and to keep on loving her no matter what. Again and again he rescues her. It is hard to explain to those who are not children of God in Christ just what the church represents for those of us who are Christians. Cutting through all social and economic differences, cutting across all language barriers, the Church is a family that allows honesty, intimacy, trust, and a sisterhood/brotherhood that is quite mysterious. The bonds of love that knit Christians together surpass blood ties. I don't mean to say that Christians are always consistent with the structures God has created for them in the church. We are no more consistent in our church structures than we are in our marriage structures, but the structures are not at fault.

God Communicates with Men and Women

Defines Their Being

I have neither the time nor the ability to show you all the richness of God's communication with us. But pick up a Bible and read it from cover to cover before making declarations about it. Set down an open challenge to God, "If you really exist, God, then I want to know if You are revealing Yourself in this book." I have no trouble believing that I have not created myself and that if I am to find out how to be happy and function in this world, I need to find it out from the person who made me. Christians are sometimes accused of being proud for their exclusivity. But I beg to differ. What humility it takes to allow oneself to be defined from the outside! What arrogance it would be to make myself the starting point of defining my own person or the world around me. No, I wish to discover the real me. I want to know from the One who made it all who I am, who He is, and how to love Him, to discover Him, to glorify Him.

When we moved from France to the United States in 1991, one of my daughters was thirteen. She is a graceful girl and from the time she was very small, had spent many hours putting on dances, plays, songs, and other such "shows" for us. Her natural bent was towards music, acting and singing. However, when she went off to American high school, these gifts were not particularly valued. I watched her struggle to express herself by learning to play basketball. Now, I'm not saying she couldn't have fun learning to play basketball, but she made herself quite unhappy during her high school years, trying to conform to an image imposed on her by those around her, instead of developing the nature she had been given.

Now this is not an exact illustration, for although I had a good idea of my daughter's skills and nature, I didn't create her. But her struggles are a good picture of what we do to ourselves. God, who created us, knows exactly what will make us happy. If we bother to ask Him, He will show us how to flower and develop, how to follow our true nature. However, if we listen to the voices of those around us, we are more than likely to end up miserable and unfulfilled, trying to play basketball, so to speak, rather than dancing. Why should I think that a group of selfish, limited human beings who don't know me and won't care what happens to me, should know more about what will make me happy than my heavenly Father, who made me, who grieves over my loneliness, who has shown me the blueprint of my life, and who has sent His own Son to die for me?

Defines their Roles

God defines how we are to relate to Him and to one another. Fortunately, we are not left to guess these things. He has revealed His mind about them. In the Bible I find a reliable, unified, deeply satisfying expression of God's will and work in the world. I've written a few children's stories, and when I see how complicated and difficult it is to tie the threads of

even a few characters' lives together in a way that makes sense for the whole story, I am amazed when I see God's story. Written over hundreds of years, by scores of authors, the Bible has a unity unparalleled in literature. Take almost any theme and follow it through from Genesis to Revelation and you will find the most amazing truths brought together. The characters are realistic. Their behavior is consistent. Their lives fit together in a stunning tapestry of history. The drama of man against evil begins in the first chapters and finds its infinite climax at the death of the incarnate Author, who stepped into the pages of His story to save His characters. Quite astounding.

God the author of History is also the author of the Word that informs us of His will and intentions, of His design for our lives. I trust Him to define for me the kind of life that will give me true satisfaction, even if it leads, as it is bound to for now, through the slough of despond and the swamp of despair or suffering.

Claims Their Obedience

God claims our obedience. We are subject to His kingship because we are His creatures, created by Him and for His glory. There is no point in denying the overwhelming claims of God. He expects us to believe Him, to trust Him, to serve Him, to give our hearts to Him, to conform our wills to His, and to "bring every thought captive to Christ." In this sense, Christianity doesn't just squash women. It squashes everyone. All who claim the name of Christ begin by dying to self. Only as the seed dies and is placed into the ground can it bring forth new life.

Promises Them His Presence

But with those demands, God promises His presence. His children are never alone. "I will neither leave you nor forsake you," He promises. As Moses said, "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:7-8)

This nearness of God, increased infinitely when Christ broke down the barrier of separation caused by the Fall. This nearness is the very foundation stone of Christian fidelity. Without the near presence of God, Christians could no more be faithful to their spouses than could any other people.

God Redeems Men and Women

Had sin not come into the world, we would not have found conforming to God's design for our lives to be a constraint. Rather, it would have been completely natural to act within the framework of that understanding. However, sin darkens our understanding and hardens our will, so that we seek freedom from what we now perceive as constraints and bondage. Consider the Gadarene demoniac to whom Christ came. He was perfectly free to do whatever he liked. His crazed, superhuman strength made him unstoppable. No one could control him. No one could imprison him. No one could tell him what to do. He didn't even bother to wear clothes. He was utterly autonomous.

But he spent his days shrieking and cutting himself, and he lived naked in the graveyard, a picture of misery, anger and insanity. His total autonomy drove him into "solitary places," as the biblical text says (Luke 8:29), and deprived him of his identity, since he could not give his own name (v. 30). Was the apostle Peter, who had witnessed this event, thinking of that man when he wrote the following words: "Men...promise freedom, while they

themselves are slaves of depravity--for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him" (2 Peter 2:19)? When the Gadarene demoniac met Christ, the forces of evil knew they had met their match. The authority of the son of God hurled out those demons and reached into that mess of a human being to rescue the man made in God's image. And what sort of image do we have when Christ has finished His work? A man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. A man commissioned by Christ to "Return home and tell how much God has done for you" (v. 39).

This is the privileged position of the Christian--to have been delivered from the bondage of our own autonomy and be seated at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in our right mind, commissioned to share the good news with our family and friends. It is this great salvation which is our sure hope. Without it, we pump a little faithfulness, love and self-sacrifice from the world's natural aquifer of moral resources, which, by the way, seems to be sinking, as it dries up under the hot sun of God's holy anger.

I heard a commentary on PBS a few days ago about ecology. It went so far as to state that crime was due to pollution. Although I would not argue against the cyclical effects of crime and pollution, I think we have it backwards. The trouble with the world is not so much man's physical pollution of its waters, which is only a picture of the real tragedy. The real problem is man's moral pollution of the earth. God brings a charge: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed" (Hosea 4:2). Columbine, the federal building in Oklahoma City, a president who prevaricates, "it all depends on what you mean by `is.'" What happens to a culture that follows this path? Hosea goes on to show the results: "Because of this the land mourns and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea are dying....they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful" (Hosea 4:3).

So what happens to the covenant? If God has entered into the agreement and His own justice is the final court of appeal, what hope do we have of ever discovering true communion and fellowship with one another, let alone with our Maker? "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31) "Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?" (Isaiah 33:14)

Sure, not Shaky

In the dry desert, as we wander, lost and despairing, we have a rock. Paul says that the rock in the desert actually "followed" God's people and provided them with living water (1 Corinthians 10:3). The very Rock on which we stand also nourishes us and quenches our thirst. Jesus Christ provides the only solid ground, the rock on which we can build our homes and marriages.

He provides us with the protection from God's wrath. The Old Testament shows a story of God's cutting a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15). In this cultural covenant ceremony, two parties would walk between animals that had been cut in two. "If we do not keep this promise, let us be cut in half like these animals," was the sense of the rite. But when God cuts a covenant with Abraham, His presence alone walks through the animals. He alone bears the consequence of our broken covenant. Christ's sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection provide a way back into fellowship with God. The curtain to the holy of holies, that special room in the temple, where God's presence is represented, is torn from top to bottom. God moves out among His people. The way is cleared. The heat shield of Christ protects us from God's holy anger. He comes to seek and to save the lost.

The Spirit that moves in our hearts to give us faith in Christ is the new creation breath of life that turns hearts of stone to hearts of flesh and allow us to love God first, to love others and to be at peace with ourselves. When we drink from the water He offers, we are never thirsty again. Men find in Him the humility to be compassionate, loving leaders. Women find in Him the power to be strong servants. Children find in Him the faith to obey sinful parents.

Personal, Not Impersonal

The God we serve is not an impersonal force or a relentless moral imperative. He makes Himself known. He comes to speak to us. He has become flesh, sharing our weak, sin-assailed bodies. Jesus came in the flesh, lived with us and suffered all that we have suffered so we would know the extent of His love. As Paul put it in Romans 8: 38: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is the love on which a Christian bases his or her life. The sacrifice of Christ paves the way for ours, until the day comes when this created order is changed and sin has no more hold.

Whole, Not Shattered

Jesus redeems both our soul and our bodies. He is, in His resurrection the first true *homo noeticus*. Those redeemed by His blood make up a new race for a new world which is coming. We live under no illusion that our bodies will die, but, as Paul put it, "though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (2 Cor. 4:8-10). The Christian faith is realistic and powerful. It stimulates the mind, creates joy in sexual union, and allows suffering and pain to become instruments of power and peace.

Intimate, Not Lonely

God's design for intimacy is wholly fulfilled in Christ. Men and women, as Jews and Gentiles, have no barrier of animosity between them. Sin is what destroyed the joyful intimacy between God and His creation. It also destroyed the pure communion of Adam with Eve. Instead of an intimate companionship, they received the curse of strife and competition in their relationship. Eve wants to "have" Adam (just as sin was crouching at the door to "have" Cain--Genesis 4:6). Adam will "dominate" Eve instead of caring for her as God intended. The relationship between the sexes and in families is immediately corrupted, producing strife, competition, jealousy, and murder (Cain and Abel). But God comes to seek out Adam and Eve and to provide a covering for their sin. He initiates the first sacrifice, and covers them with animal skins.

God restores intimacy with His people, and though we live in a situation of "already/not yet" (already redeemed, not yet in possession of our new bodies; already rescued, not yet out of earshot of our enemy; already perfect in Christ, not yet done with the old sinful nature), one day we will see God face to face and live with Him eternally. The power of Christ's death and resurrection gives men and women the power to restore relationships as God intended them to be in marriage, and indeed to go beyond the creational structures into the first explorations of the new-creation structures.

The Woman Within the Covenant

I've been very theological and I haven't spoken much about women. But it has been of utmost importance to describe the context of my worldview. Within it, you will see and understand my attitude to women. I know that whether I'm from Mars or Venus, my worldview will certainly be foreign to you, unless you are a member of the King's family. I was an oddball at Wellesley in the '60s and I'm sure I still come across as an oddball to you today. But in order to explain to you why I have chosen the vocation of wife and mother, I had to give you the big picture.

When I arrived at Wellesley College at the age of 17, I had my career path all charted out. I wanted to be the wife of a pastor, to bear children and love them, to support and encourage a godly man in his efforts to serve Christ. I was eager to get the best possible education, in order to use my mind to its fullest capacity in this calling and so that I could support myself if the Lord decided that I should stay single.

I met my future husband the first semester of college. I added an extra course each term, and graduated in January of my senior year. We married on Jan. 30th of 1971 and are still married today, twenty-nine years later. I have seven children from 12 to 27 and three grandchildren. I have never for one moment regretted the choice I made. However, it would not be true to say that I have not entertained the tempting whispers of my feminist surroundings. "Children are wonderful," I tell myself sometimes, "but if you were really disciplined to write, you could write a better novel than that one." And I begin to imagine having written a *really influential* book. On occasion, I have given in to various mental promptings to discovering "real" value. Sometimes they have fit into our family structure very well, and proven to be good and proper. Sometimes they were the whispers of conceit.

Looking back over the first twenty-nine years of married life, I might take stock of my "successes," the kinds of things I could put on a resume: I have helped start a Christian school, made a highly effective method of communicating with the deaf known and popular in France, taught kindergarten, 7th grade, physical education in a school for delinquent girls, Cued Speech in a graduate program for speech therapists and graduate writing skills in a Seminary; I have written and produced several plays for Christian schools and churches, served on the board of various organizations, published articles and a novel, edited a dozen or so theological books and Doctor of Ministry projects, and spoken at numerous women's retreats and functions. However, my real resume, the one God will be holding when I see Him, will have a different list of achievements altogether. The achievements of my human resume may have elements that are mentioned on my real one, but many are rubbish in comparison to the value of bearing, nourishing, nurturing, teaching, loving and training seven fabulously intriguing and rewarding images of God, and having helped to form the image of Christ in my husband.

The joy of laughing over a cup of tea, of resolving a conflict, of seeing a child freed from the grip of temptation, of hearing my family sing around the table, of watching the happy antics of my grandchildren, of seeing my husband and my children step out of the house encouraged, buoyed up, and able to pronounce the wonders of the name of God to those around them--all through the ministering touches that God has given them through me--these are joys beyond compare.

I highly recommend the calling of wife and mother. If you want the challenge of learning managerial skills, try organizing the lives of nine people living under the same roof. If you want to learn psychology, sit and listen to five daughters mulling over the pros and cons of particular young men they have met. If you want to understand the power of spirituality,

face a rebellious twelve year old who stands defiantly in front of you and says, "NO!" What power have you over her heart? Only that of prayer and of faith, for only God can change a heart. Do you want an intellectual challenge? Try explaining atomic energy to your four-year old. Do you want to learn about linguistics, or special education? Try teaching both French and English to a profoundly deaf two-year old. Do you want to develop characteristics of mercy, patience, and wisdom? Then close your mouth and listen to the pains and struggles of your husband as he goes through a career change. Do you want a close circle of friends? Find four women who care about you and pray with them every Monday for two hours.

When I lose sight of these satisfactions, or when they are not enough to make me glad I have chosen to follow my career choice, I imagine that day when I stand before "the judgment seat of Christ," as all of us will do, "to receive what is due, for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10) That day, I will have, by the sustaining grace of Christ, the supreme ecstasy of hearing from my Savior Himself,

Come, blessed by my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me...Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:34-36,40).

I'm not always sure exactly what it means to be a woman. I have struggled with my own expectations, those of my husband, those of the society around me. I have looked at the Scriptures, which tell me to count holiness to be more important than beauty, but which imply throughout that I should find my feminine body and its seductive power to be a beautiful gift in my relationship with my husband. Like other women, I struggle with these things. And my husband struggles to love my particular body, rather than yearning after some "composite picture," or after the body of other women. We both ask God to power up our romance with the very simple conclusion that I am very feminine because I am a woman, created in God's image. And I must avoid the temptation of imposing on my husband some ideal picture of what it means to be manly. Instead, I choose to love the specific man who is my husband, and I leave the conforming of image to the power of the Spirit. It is not my husband, Peter's job to conform me to his image, nor is it my job to conform him to my image. Rather it is the Holy Spirit's job to conform each of us, male and female, to the image of Christ.

In Covenant Relationship with God

Designed in the Image of God

My first duty as a woman is to my heavenly Husband, to Him who redeemed the Church. If I develop in my understanding of my relationship to God, I will become more and more womanly. I am in God's image, a woman in God's image. "Male and female created He them." So as I conform to the image of Christ, I will conform more and more to the female image of God that I am. I do not mean to imply by this that I see Christ as some amorphous being. No, Jesus Christ was God incarnate, and he was a male human being. However, in His role as Savior, He understood both submission and authority and can therefore identify with my womanly struggles.

Designed to Reflect Christ

I was designed a woman. Part of that design is to submit myself to my husband. In the struggle against my sinful desire for autonomy, I look to Christ. Jesus is my example of willing submission. He went to the cross out of love. I have never considered Jesus a wimp for going to the cross, for submitting Himself to His Father's will. If ever a human being was in an unjust situation, suffering infinitely for no apparently good reason, it was Christ. The feminist theologians scoff at the cross, denying their need for "folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."⁸

They call the crucifixion the ultimate in child abuse. But Jesus willingly laid down his life for us. This is not child abuse. There was no other way for him to achieve salvation but to walk through those dark hours of absolute loneliness and utter abandonment. He did it for the glory that was set before Him. He did it out of love for me, and out of love for His Father.

I can identify with Christ. When the pains of childbirth threaten to overwhelm a woman, she looks to the joy that is set before her, and cheers the contractions on, for they bring life and peace and a new beginning. "It is finished!" And a new life emerges, a new beginning. It is finished, yet it has just begun, this adventure of a new person.

But a Christian woman's role is not submission only. She is often called upon to exercise authority--over her children, over a classroom, or in a job she holds. In these areas, a woman must rely on Christ's humility and power to exercise authority in a firm but compassionate way.

In Covenant Relationship with her Husband

Bring All Things Together Under One Head

The Bible teaches us that Christ is the head of the church and that the church's role is to "bring all things together under one head, even Christ." I see this as a very large umbrella, with Christ's sovereignty as the very tip. Under the protection of that larger umbrella, I imagine a little family sitting under a smaller umbrella. The father is to be the head of that home, in a role of authority over his wife and children (please remember that we have already established the fact that authority does not mean ontological superiority, but is a function of role). The Christian wife's job is to "bring all things under one head," her husband. I do not mean this in an absolute sense, of course. But insofar as she is gathering the experiences and relationships of her family together in submission to her husband, making an orderly, safe, peaceful and welcoming home, she is at the same time bringing things under her husband's lordship and under Christ's. A Christian woman's efforts to bring all things together under her husband's headship is a subset of the efforts of the church to bring all things together under one head, Christ.

Give and Receive Honor

The Bible's description of couples is rich. The woman accepts the lordship of her husband within the bounds that God has prescribed. But a woman also receives the honor of her husband. 1 Corinthians paints an interdependent circle. Christ is the head of the man, and the man is the image and glory of God. It is no shame to be given that title! And it is no shame for the woman to accept that "the woman is the glory of man." The woman was created for the man, says Paul, and came from the man. Seems mighty sexist so far! Though even this statement is not really "sexist." However, Paul goes on to say, a few verses later: "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God."

A woman need not find it humiliating to accept the role of support, encouragement and cheerleader for her husband. All the while she is honoring Christ in this way, she is glorifying her man, who is glorifying Christ, who is glorifying God. God the Father lifts up Christ and glorifies Him. So also, a Christian husband lifts up his wife and glorifies her. Proverbs 31 says,

Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all." Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

In spite of the tug for immediate glory that sometimes pulls at my soul, I know that the goal I am pursuing is of much more long-lasting value. I'm not saying that I will never try to write a book, but I do consider the hearts of my children and my husband to be books of eternal worth. And I realize the territory of my home belongs to Christ. I am free, even bound, to use that home for His honor. In deciding not to pursue the call of a career outside the home, I am free to hear the calls of many people who need compassion, wisdom, a bed, or a meal.

I join my voice to that of John Piper, who pleads with Christian women,

That you not assume that secular employment is a greater challenge or a better use of your life than the countless opportunities of service and witness in the home, the neighborhood, the community, the church, and the world; that you not only pose the question: career or full-time homemaker?, but that you ask just as seriously: full-time career or freedom for ministry? That you ask: Which would be greater for the Kingdom--to work for someone who tells you what to do to make his or her business prosper, or to be God's free agent dreaming your own dream about how your time and your home and your creativity could make God's business prosper? And that in all this you make your choices not on the basis of secular trends of upward lifestyle expectations, but on the basis of what will strengthen the faith of the family and advance the cause of Christ.⁹

A Christian Sister

A Christian woman is not an echo of her husband, nor is she to sit idly by while he runs headlong down the path of destruction. She is to call him courageously to obedience. This courageous call has a strength unparalleled when such a call is offered humbly, quietly, without judgment and when the wife's life is a sparkling testimony of the love she expects from her husband. When she speaks peacefully, in love, unveiling sin and covering it in forgiveness, she is a kind of presence of God in a man's life. Some men react badly to this, since a godly woman who watches and says nothing, but goes on loving, is the kind of presence that sin cannot bear. Sometimes a man will break under the strain of such holiness. Peter offers advice to Christian women married to unbelievers: "Wives, in the same way, be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1 Peter 3:1-2). As Christ empowers a Christian woman to live this way, the hearts of men are won over.

Faith

A Christian woman exercises faith in submitting to a sinner. John Calvin argues that in submitting to the authority of human pastors and leaders, Christians show to the watching world the power of faith. How amazing that men and women should actually grow more godly by submitting themselves to sinful leaders. By this I do not mean that one deliberately follows sinful people into disobedience. However, every leader in the church, whether elder, pastor, or the husband in his home, is a sinner. We do not submit to them because of any natural or automatic respect we hold for them in their sinful nature. Rather, it is an exercise of our faith in Christ that we submit.

In Covenant Relationship with her Children

A Christian woman instructs and disciplines her children.

The relationship of faithful obedience to a covenant relationship with God, and the subordinate faithful covenant that a woman has with her husband, provides the structure and foundation for her relationship with her children. Here again, the final goal is "bringing all things together under one head, Christ." Keeping this purpose statement in mind will help the Christian woman make good, right decisions in relation to her children. It gives her objective content on which to base moral instruction and household rules. It gives her outside strength so that she does not have to depend on her children's love for her identity. It keeps her from "tearing down her own house," as the book of Proverbs says is the tendency of the foolish woman (14:1). Rather than foolishly undermining the respect her children might have for her husband, she is to do all in her power to foster that respect.

A Christian woman's service to her children is a privilege

The Christian mother does not need to feel the pressure of criticism that she is a "doormat." She realizes that to be a Christian, she starts out as a doormat anyway--laying down her life for others. Of course, she understands that part of her job is to teach them to serve, too. And she does not render them incompetent by continuing to do for them what they should be doing for themselves. However, she has the freedom to lay down her personal "rights," her ego, her need to be right, or to receive honor. All these sacrifices a mother makes continually. Unfortunately, the message women receive today is that they are somehow imbalanced if they have decided to follow a sacrificial path. As a Christian woman, I would hereby like to affirm my God-given right to self-sacrifice!

A Christian woman receives the honor and love of both children and husband

As any giving wife and mother knows, the rewards for sacrifice are many. Children and husbands are often inspired themselves by the example of the mother and wife. Their gratitude is real and their praise genuine. Even openly rebellious children secretly (or even openly) admire and praise a mother who has stuck by them through anguish and suffering. Husbands are honored by the constant respect they are shown, even when they have broken faith in some way. And of course, as I have already mentioned, the Christian woman's highest honor is to be received and recommended by Christ Himself, whose self-sacrifice knew no limits.

In Covenant Relationship with the Church

A Christian woman has creative freedom to use all her gifts.

Teacher, counselor, activities coordinator, gourmet cook, gardener, interior decorator, painter, writer, financial consultant, coach, spiritual guide--all this and heaven too! Though

full-time mothering is constraining in many ways, Christian women who dedicate themselves to their husband, their children, and their church also have many occasions to be of service in the community. However, all activities come under the scrutiny of the main goal: bringing all things under Christ's headship. A Christian woman's highest satisfaction comes in seeing her husband, her children and her friends dedicate themselves to the honor and glory of Jesus Christ.

Single Women

I have spoken mainly of a married woman. God has set us in families, and marriage is His normative structure. It is not to be the exception, but the rule.

However, not everyone is married and God does call some to be single. The single woman is still a woman, however. She will use her nurturing instincts to nurture others' children or younger women. She will bring honor to male leaders in her church and her community. She will work to create a home that brings honor to the name of Christ by serving the homeless, feeding the poor, and harboring the weak. She will obey God's command to multiply by bringing others to the banquet table of Christ and her home can serve in that capacity. She can create a Christian family in her church and find authority structures and council in that larger family. In the Christian body, no one is autonomous. Each needs the other.

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

Marriage - the Image of God's Fellowship with His Creatures

Jesus taught that in heaven there will be no giving or taking in marriage. I do not believe this should be taken to mean that the distinctions will be lost between men and women, for insofar as those created structures reflect God's very nature, they will probably not fade away. However, human marriage is not the ultimate relational pattern for intimacy, fidelity, personal love, and fruitfulness. The relationship that exemplifies these qualities is that found in the trinity itself, but also that found, by extension, between Christ and His church. Like an enthusiastic and responsible bridegroom, Jesus has gone ahead of His bride, the church, to get the house ready. All that we know of the beauty and intimacy of marriage is a passing shadow in comparison with the love relationship Christ has with His church.

In Revelation the apostle John has a vision of heaven. In it a great multitude shouts: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." Then the angel said to me, "Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" (Rev. 19: 6-9)

This is the context of marriage. This final marriage provides the groundwork for all human marriage. Only when a husband understands the extent of Christ's sacrifice and the power of his resurrection will he be able to do what Christ asks him to do in a marriage:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it just as Christ does the church--for we are members of his

body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery-but I am talking about Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:25-31)

Only when a woman understands that her worth, value and identity do not rest on how her husband sees her, or on how her world defines her, but on Christ's absolute love for her, will she have the strength to willingly and gladly submit herself to her husband's authority in marriage:

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:22-24).

Humble Ourselves by Receiving the Wedding Dress - Ezekiel 16, Revelation

Does Christianity squash women? Oh yes, it squashes them, as it does any Christian. We are slaves to Christ. I do not own my own body. I am not the master of my soul. It is humbling (though not humiliating) to realize that all my righteousness is "filthy rags" in God's eyes. It is impossibly difficult to swallow my pride and to admit that I have nothing to offer God. To be a Christian is to admit sin, to fall on one's face before a holy God and beg forgiveness. The radical feminist theologians are quite right. If we want to destroy marriage structures as Christianity defines them, we must destroy the ultimate Patriarch.

In Ezekiel 16 we see a highly patriarchal picture. A baby girl is thrown out at birth, and lies in a field, still covered in blood, unwashed, and unloved. A young man passes by and is moved with compassion. He lifts the newborn up and takes her to be washed and cared for. He provides all she needs in the way of clothing and nurture until she is a young woman. One day, he passes to see how she is faring, and is struck with her emerging adult beauty. He buys her a wedding dress, and takes her as his wife.

This is the picture God gives us of his care for us, His people. In today's terms, this allegory is highly offensive. Is a woman dependent on a man's care? Is she to be seen as refuse until a man comes to rescue her? Is she his property that he should be able to ride by one day and seize her as his own? Yet each Christian has had to admit to the reality of that picture. We are dead in our sins--tossed on the trash heap of the world. Though we were born to have value, we are nothing. No one cares. No one is there to rescue us. But Christ comes to rescue us, to wash us clean, to provide the clothes of his righteousness for us. Do you see that Christians are not arrogant, but thoroughly humble? Christians have admitted that they are entirely dependent in life or in death on the grace and mercy of a loving heavenly Husband. Their value is determined by Him. Their purpose is to please Him. Their existence is to bring His name honor. Their love is all for Him. Their name is His. Their identity is engraved in the hands of the one who died for them.

This humility before Him, this identity in Him, and this obedience to Him is the joy, the strength, the honor, the power, the motivation, the passion and the ecstasy of the Christian believer. If my Creator and my heavenly Father has declared the marriage structure to be good, because it reflects something about Him, and because it will teach me of my Savior, then I will embrace it with all my heart, even when my own sin still cries for me to rebel against it. I renounce the freedom to destroy myself and cling rather to the slavery that brings me life and love. I'll take the beauty that God offers me:

"You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord" (Ezekiel 16:14).

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17).

Before the Throne of God Above

by Charitie Lees Bancroft (1841-1923)

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong a perfect plea,
A great high priest whose name is "Love,"
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart;
I know that while in heav'n He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair,
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the Just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.

Behold Him there! The risen Lamb!
My perfect, spotless Righteousness,
The great unchangeable I AM,
the King of glory and of grace.
One with Himself, I cannot die,
My soul is purchased by His blood;
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ, my Savior and my God.

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Notes:

¹ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 250f.

Lesson 12– Enter the Battle

Ephesians 6:10-23

HOOK:

***Context:** Paul is wrapping up the letter. To me, at first glance, he finishes in an odd way. He gives us the famous ‘armor of God’ section. It sort of seems like he takes a tangent to something he has been thinking of as an analogy for quite some time. But, perhaps it is not so odd. Perhaps there is a specific reason very intentional and fitting indeed.

From the intro to ‘Observation’: “The devil’s schemes are to hurt the person and name of Christ by hurting God’s people and his bride, the church through disunity!” Therefore we need the armor of God to battle against division in the church! We need the armor of God to enable right relationships between people which has been the theme of this letter from the start.

Furthermore, the reality of the spiritual nature of the world must be remembered. It is often easy to think that the physical world is more ‘real’ than the spiritual. But that is simply not true and leads to an old heresy of dualism in which we credit one part of existence with more value than another. The Spiritual world is just as real as the physical though we don’t see it through the same faculties. Ex. Who would say that air does not exist? Though we can’t touch it, taste it, see it, yet we know it exists! The comparison is not perfect, but you get what I mean. Paul wants us to remember that all that he has said is not just a physical formula to implement. We are to remember that there are real spiritual realities both for us and against us and there is a battle raging for the allegiance of our hearts!

Read the Section: Ephesians 6:10-23

LOOK:

Source of the Armor- Ephesians 6:10

1. Vs. 10-“Be Strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might”. **Look up: Jeremiah 17:5-9, Joshua 1:8-9-** Where do we get our strength from in battle according to these passages?

This is the central theme in this passage. We need God’s strength to battle the temptations of the world in which we live. The battle however is not against people. It is against the spiritual forces. Therefore we must not have an “us/them” type of attitude, which keeps the evil world at arms distance. But we can have an engagement attitude with the world knowing that we have Christ’s strength by which to be strong.

2. Is there any battle going on in your life right now that looks like “us/them”, “you/them”?

Enemy of the Armor Ephesians 6:11-13

1. What do you remember about the darkness and the schemes of the “evil one” from Ephesians 2:2 section? Read these passages as well and discuss the reality of an enemy that Paul talks of: **John 8:42-47, John 10:10, 2 Corinthians 4:4**

There are some pretty wacky things out there related to what people attribute to Satan. But to deny his existence is to deny a central teaching of the Bible. There really is an enemy out there and he really is at work. In the end the story has been told, he will fail. But until Christ returns, he will try to hurt God by hurting God’s people. God has allowed a period of time for more people to come to authentic faith. Until that time we live in a world of “already, not yet” as I have spoken of.

2. What have you learned that this enemy wants to do?

He prowls around and destroys. He causes pain and despair, anguish and hurt. He wants nothing less than for people to curse the true God and deny Him. He will do whatever he can, either blatant or subtle to cause humans to doubt God’s goodness and reality. He is incredibly powerful and cunning. He knows human nature well. He has existed and worked from the beginning. One day it will end which is the great hope of the world. C.S. Lewis has a masterful work called “The Screwtape Letters” which gives remarkable clarity to the ploys and schemes of this enemy.

3. What have you seen him do in the context of relationships?

Preparation for the Armor- Ephesians 13b-20

***Context:** The phrase “gird your loins” comes from military language. Under his armor, a Roman soldier wore at least one wide belt. This protected his lower abdomen, held his outfit together and served as a place to hang his armor. A breastplate protected his upper torso. Boots gave him firm footing. Just before engaging the enemy he would put on his helmet and pick up his shield. The shield, which was four feet long and overlaid with linen and wet leather to absorb fiery arrows. Some arrows used in warfare were hollow reeds filled with flammable liquid that would explode on impact.

1. Paul compares the warrior’s belt to truth. Take a look at a few other references to truth in Ephesians (vv. 1:13; 4:15, 21; 5:9). Jesus, speaking of Satan, said, “he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).” What are some ways that we can fail to stand in the truth?

Truth, like the belt, must under-gird every other piece of armor. We can deny the truth by denying the gospel (v. 1:13), by adapting worldly beliefs (v. 4:14) or by living lifestyles inconsistent with the gospel (vv. 4:19-24).

2. Paul compares his breastplate to righteousness or purity. What are a few ways that impurity can discredit a believer?

Paul discussed sexual immorality, greed, and vulgar speech in 5:3-5. Impure behaviors undermine a person's intimacy with God and often damage his or her reputation and ultimately God's reputation.

3. Paul compares the soldier's surefootedness to the peace that comes from the gospel. What are some ways that the gospel gives us peace and protects us from the enemy that we learned about earlier in Ephesians? In general?

A person who has trusted Christ can know that God's love is pure and strong and it will outlast any circumstance. Ultimately all believers will live eternally with God in heaven. As Paul has said elsewhere, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Rom. 8:31.

4. In what ways is faith a shield?

Speaking of Satan, Jesus said, "He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan is also called the accuser of believers (Rev 12:10). A Christian's resolute belief in the Lord extinguishes Satan's arrows.

5. Paul compares the warrior's helmet to salvation or deliverance. How does the future deliverance God promises protect us now?

We know that God will ultimately deliver all believers from all sin and pain. Romans 8:31 states, "He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" Therefore we live in hope. We will be resurrected with Christ some day and our lives and bodies will be restored!

6. The soldier's only offensive weapon is a sword. The sword that the Holy Spirit has given Christians is the Word of God. Where do you encounter the word of God and how has it affected you?

7. Once the soldier has his defenses in place and his weapon in hand, what does Paul command him to do? What does that mean for us?

8. What does it mean to pray "at all times in the Spirit"?

Paul is describing a lifestyle of dependence on God. He is describing intimacy with Him, short accounts with sin and alignment with His will. Reflect on Romans 12:1-2 which you have discussed previously.

9. A theme of Ephesians has been the receiving of the goodness of God by grace alone. Now we come to a section where we need to 'do battle' and work hard, which can seem to be the antithesis of receiving grace freely. How do we make sense of this?

God's grace is indeed free, but remember that there is an enemy desiring to thwart the experience of God's grace. We are to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" says Paul in another letter and so there is a constant balance between grace and works. Our diligence and discipline is never what warrants God's blessing, but without the response of working hard and doing battle, over time the experience of God's grace becomes ineffectual.

10. Do you tend to rely on God's grace to a fault or tend to work out salvation to a fault? What leads you to either side of error?

Battle with the Armor- Ephesians Chapter 1-6

***World View:** Paul is really giving us a world-view picture in this whole entire letter. He views the world and what is going on all around us entirely different than the average person walking down the street. He suggests that there is much more going on behind the scenes than we would readily imagine. A World View is the framework or system by which we organize and process events and happenings around us, here is a more complete definition.

We might say that each of us carries a model of the universe inside our heads that tells us what the world is like and how we should live in it. A classic book on worldviews is titled 'The Universe Next Door', suggesting that we all have a mental or conceptual universe in which we 'live' a network of principles that answer the fundamental questions of life: "Who are we? Where did we come from? What is the purpose of life? The author of the book, James Sire invites readers to examine a variety of worldviews in order to understand the mental universe held by other people- those living 'next door'.

A worldview is not the same thing as a formal philosophy; otherwise, it would be only for professional philosophers. Even ordinary people have a set of convictions about how reality functions and how they should live. Because we are made in God's image, we all seek to make sense of life. Some convictions are conscious, while others are unconscious, but together they form a more or less consistent picture of reality. Human beings "are incapable of holding purely arbitrary opinions or making entirely unprincipled decisions," writes Al Wolters in a book on worldview. Because we are by nature rational and responsible beings, we sense that "we need some creed to live by, some map by which to chart our course." -Total Truth- Nancy Pearcey

A world-view is so significant to what we believe and how we act though few people are really aware that they have a world-view. One of the goals of the Christian is to develop a world view that revolves around the reality of Christ and live lives that reflect His presence and power in every area of life.....Christianity is a 'Total Truth' as Francis Schaeffer said, "Christianity is not merely religious truth, it is total truth- truth about the whole of reality." We have to learn to stop compartmentalizing our faith into parts where God has control and influence, and parts where we exclude and treat as 'secular'.

1. Is your Christianity "Total Christianity"?
2. Where do you tend to compartmentalize your faith?
3. Where does God not tend to have access or where do you treat life as secular and not 'sacred'?
(Job choices?, movies you watch?, how you treat your family?, music you listen to?, school?, relationships at school and work?)

[23] Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [24] Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. (Ephesians 6:23-24 ESV)

Oh Jesus, would that be true. Would my brothers and sisters find peace in you that comes from faith that you give them. Would grace so infuse them that they would live upright and honorable lives loving one another as an expression of loving you. Amen

Final Questions:

- What have you learned about who God is?
- What have you learned about who you are?
- What have you learned about who others are?
- What have you learned about what you are called to?
- What heart motivations are there to follow Christ?
- Summarize how Paul proposes to help the Ephesians grow in unity and in Christ?

TOOK:

Assignment:

- Read 'War of the Worlds' (article following)
- Make an outline of Ephesians from memory.
- Write in your journal the things you have learned from Ephesians and the things that you want to put into practice.
- Teach this to someone else!

Suggested Reading: Total Truth, Nancy Pearcey; The Universe Next Door, James Sire; Naming the Elephant, James Sire; World Views in Conflict, Ronald Nash

WAR OF THE WORLDS

Understanding Worldviews: Being an Effective Witness to a Multicultural Campus

by Bayard Taylor

If you're excited about what Jesus has done for you, most likely you're going to brighten when a conversation turns toward spiritual things. *All right! A chance to share my faith!* Yet more often than not we leave such conversations with a nagging sense that somehow things didn't go as well as we might have hoped. One moment we were talking about God and the next we were off on some odd tangent or enmeshed in a grotesque misunderstanding of God or Christian faith. Get burned enough times and the optimism of *All right! A chance to share my faith* is quickly replaced by the dread of *This can only end badly!*

This confusing and disheartening scenario is fairly typical on the university campus, where the marketplace of ideas is a multiplicity of conflicting “-isms,” religions, and philosophies. What are we to make of this jumble of ideas and chaos of diversity? And even if we manage to get some idea of what's going on, how do we minister without coming off as judgmental, hypocritical, narrow-minded, bigoted, hate-filled, homophobic, sexually repressed, rednecked, racist, warmongering, genocidal, capitalist, fascist. . . . Am I leaving anything out? Neocolonialistic?

Welcome to the campus of Postmodern U—a microcosm of worldviews. If you want to be an ambassador for Christ in this world, you need to know how to decode and interact with a wide assortment of viewpoints and worldviews, and that begins with the ability to identify them.

There Will Be Blood

Before we go any further, we need to realize that, in one sense, being misunderstood, misjudged, and maligned goes with the territory of following Christ. Jesus told us, in effect, “If they hate me, they'll hate you” (Mark 13:13; John 15:18). The other New Testament writers warned us about the fires of persecution (Acts 8:1; 11:19; 13:50; Romans 8:35; Galatians 6:12; 2 Timothy 3:12) and then went through those fires themselves.

A pastor in India once told me, “In India, you always need to be ready to preach, pray, or die for the gospel.” He said it with a smile on his face, but he wasn't kidding. And to a greater or lesser degree, what he said is true everywhere.

When Jesus died on the cross, he paid for our sins *and* he purchased the right for his people to proclaim the gospel in all the world—a right the church has called the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). To advance this Great Commission, God the Father and God the Son sent God the Holy Spirit to equip the church to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (John 14:26; 15:26). The gospel is the best possible news for all peoples and cultures everywhere, and everyone on the planet should have the opportunity to respond to it.

In another sense, though, if we're honest about history, we have to admit that Christians (or at least those wearing

the label) have brought reproach on the name of God by misusing the Bible. At least some of the anti-Christian sentiment we face is not without warrant. Eurocentric Christians, for example, have often confused the kingdom of God with Western culture. In the name of religion, the West has a legacy of religious wars, colonialist oppression, and anti-Semitism. And as I'm sure you've heard, the list goes on. (A fellow Californian who read an early draft of this essay urged me to mention that the early missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands even banned the islanders from surfing. Dude, that's, like, so uncool.)

As Christians, we need to have the humility and forthrightness to confess our sins and admit the transgressions of our forebearers honestly and fully. We lose credibility if we don't.

What We Have Here Is a Failure to Communicate

That said (and it did need to be said), I wonder how much of the disconnect we feel with unbelievers is a listening problem—an inability on our part to understand and empathize with where people are coming from. Maybe this story will shed some light on what I'm talking about.

At a Christian Conference for college students, I was sitting working on my laptop in the lobby of the hotel where we were staying. A girl from the conference came up to a guy sitting near me who was within earshot. She was—bless her heart—attempting to witness. The man was a secular Israeli Jew passing through for a business trip. He was an atheist.

It was quite an interesting encounter. The young woman did all of the standard things she had been trained to do, but it was mostly an exercise in missing the point because she couldn't/didn't correct her course and adjust for the fact that this guy was (a) a secular Jew and not a practicing one and (b) an atheist, which really confused her.

A little course in worldviews could have been very useful at that point. Unfortunately, this was not a part of her training.

As a credit to her sensitivities, however, there was a point in the conversation in which she really seemed to make inroads with this atheist (who was cordial but not afraid to speak his mind about the fact that she seemed not to hear what he was really saying to her) and that was when she offered to pray for him

and any requests he might have. That stopped him in his tracks; he had to really engage with what she was saying for a minute. He eventually came up with a request about the safety and welfare of his immediate family. She prayed. Who knows what happened on a spiritual plane?

God can use us whether we have it all together or not. But wouldn't it be better if we were able to really listen and find a way to hear what people were saying to us? Wouldn't it be better to comprehend where people were coming from and why they think the way they do?

The Men-from-Mars Perspective

To find that way, here's a thought experiment. Imagine space visitors coming to us from Mars on a fact-finding mission. These little green men (okay, and women, although I confess I don't know much about Martian sexuality) are curious and want to discover the key ideas that drive the various cultures here on earth.

Imagine also the following: (1) These visitors are able to come to earth without attracting attention to their technologically advanced saucerlike spacecrafts. (2) They can move around and blend into any surroundings without being seen, so they're able to study us without their behaviors influencing our behaviors. (3) They all have the Martian equivalents of Ph.D.'s in anthropology and ethnography and thus have completely freed themselves from their own cultural prejudices and baggage. (I'll admit this is going a long way to go to create a scenario of complete objectivity, but whatever.)

What would our Martians see?

I submit that at first our extraterrestrial visitors would marvel at the startling diversity and complexity of us humans. After a while, though, their analytical skills would kick in and they would start to discern some distinctive patterns. If they then began writing their reports to their superiors in English, they would soon be talking about the concept of *worldview* and how worldviews are the biggest clues to the earthlings' thinking and behaviors, even more important than whatever religions or philosophies they say they believe. A critical observation (and one making us very vulnerable should the aliens pursue conquest, colonization, and/or body snatching).

Our word *worldview* comes from the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who in 1768 coined the term as *Weltanschauung* (in

German *Welt* = "world" and *anschaung* = "view"). As the word itself suggests, a worldview is as a way of looking at the world. Your worldview is like the eyeglasses through which you view and interpret your experiences. Other phrases that capture the idea are "mental grid," "frame of reference," and "shared perceptions of what is real, true, and good."

A worldview seeks to answer the Big Questions in life, such as Who am I? Where did I come from? What's most important in life? It's a whole mountain of assumptions of which you may or may not be aware but upon which your conclusions are based.

Worldview is not the same as culture. Culture is the sum total of language, behavior, social hierarchies, religion, customs, taboos, and punishments for acting outside social norms. In traditional cultures, everyone pretty much accepts one controlling worldview say Karma, or Communism. But in contemporary cultures, where people have significantly more lifestyle and belief options, you can have neighbors living side by side who share a similar culture (say, southern California suburban) but who have completely different worldviews.

A Beautiful Worldview Mind

The term *worldview*, and what is meant by it, is a mosh pit of confusion. It's applied in numerous senses: cultural, political, economic, save-the-world cause, religious, philosophical, and artistic. Sometimes it's spelled as two words: *world view*. Here we'll spell it *worldview* and we'll try to limit the worldview discussion to the Big Questions just mentioned, especially as they relate to the questions of spiritual reality (whether there is a God or gods or no god) and what it means to be human.

In the university and in life, no single worldview has a monopoly on the smart people. You're always going to find people who are smarter than you are and who will passionately and eloquently promote their worldviews. Sharp wit and a high IQ do not make a person's worldview true; they only mean that person can cleverly portray it.

But when you're around people who are exceptionally bright, it's easy to feel intimidated. In their company, remember that you don't have to be a genius to hold to or defend a biblical worldview. You can trust that God is really, really smart and that he gives you his Holy Spirit for guidance and wisdom. You don't have to have all the answers. Don't feel threatened. Ask questions; see what you can learn. Don't be fooled into thinking that intelligence is the main factor in discerning or knowing God's truth. It's not.

At Play at Leveling the Playing Fields of the Lord

Simply put, on the college campuses of the world, Christianity has an image problem. Christians are often put at a disadvantage, saddled with negative stereotypes that make Christian faith look dumb or unmenable. Christians are accused of being religious, acting blindly on faith, not questioning their assumptions, and being narrow-minded. However, the truth is that every worldview, even atheism, is as reliant on faith, as guilty of assumptions, and as unemcoming of contrary truth claims.

If you can get these five things all worldviews share under your belt, it really levels the playing field.

1. *Not everybody has a religion, but everybody has a worldview that acts almost exactly like a religion.*



Having a worldview is part of our common humanity; we can't get away from it. Everybody has a worldview, whether we realize it or not, have thought it through, or can articulate it. People usually just assume that the way they look at the world is the right way.

So the big controversy is not between people who "think scientifically" and those who "need religion." No matter whether people consider themselves religious or not, *all* people live *religiously* by their worldview assumptions.

2. *All worldviews begin with a set of assumptions that can only be taken "by faith."*

No worldview is established by the sheer force of logic or unassailable proofs. For example, some people say confidently that there is no God or that God cannot be real. But how can they *know* that? To *know* there is no God you'd have to know everything in the universe, and you'd

have to be present everywhere in the universe to be able to know that God wasn't hiding somewhere. To claim there is no God is not provable—it's an article of faith.

An apparently less extreme position is to say that even if there were a God, we can't ever know for sure that God exists. But again, how could any human being, limited as he or she is by space, time, and intellect, claim to know *for sure* that God can't be known? It's a ridiculously audacious claim!

Sometimes Christians fall into the trap of thinking that the truth of Christianity can be conclusively settled either by bomb-proof arguments or by miracles. It's true that providing people reasons or evidences to believe in God (the study of apologetics) can help. It's also true that when God does a miracle in front of your own eyes it can, well, open them. But somewhere in there faith has to happen, and faith is the decisive issue.

Worldview is the intellectual and cultural furniture in the room. We use it all the time and don't think much about it. Worldview is unseen, like the air we breathe.

So it's not just Christians or religious people who take things by faith while others rely only on reason and logic. *Everybody* has a faith starting point, even if that starting point is a set of assumptions about nonbelief.

3. *Worldview assumptions are rarely acknowledged openly, questioned, or challenged by those who hold them.*

Worldview is the intellectual and cultural furniture in the room. We use it all the time and don't think much about it. Worldview is unseen, like the air we breathe. It's under our noses, but we don't notice. It is the real Matrix, if you will.

Worldview assumptions pass under our radar screens, yet they control much of our life and behavior. As we think, so we do. And we act on what we truly believe not necessarily on what we say we believe.

For most people, worldview assumptions go so deep that they don't know how to respond when their assumptions are exposed or brought into question. There's a Zen story about two fish swimming in a fishbowl. One says to the other, "Say, what's it like to live in water?" The other fish was silenced—a Zen way of saying the question blew his mind. The fish's whole existence had been always and only in water. He had never considered an alternative.

The secular world acts as if it's mainly (or only) Christians who have unexamined assumptions or who are unwilling to question their assumptions. In fact, this is how most people operate no matter what their worldview is.

4. *No worldview is totally open-minded; every worldview forces some narrowing of the mind.*

If it's total open-mindedness you're after, you've got a problem because no worldview is (or can be) completely open-minded. All worldviews make truth claims that exclude other worldviews. It's what makes a worldview a worldview.

Some worldviews try to sidestep this issue. They condemn narrow-mindedness and at the same time say, "The Truth is that there is no truth." Their worldview assumption alone is seen as right; any viewpoints or worldviews that

disagree with their main assumption are obviously and horribly ignorant or wrong.

One of the surest indicators that you're in worldview conflict is when someone hints or says, "But that's absurd!" When someone says this, pay close attention to how that person's worldview assumptions are being revealed.

A hundred years ago, in our culture, most people believed that you could be neutral or objective regarding worldview and use reason to get to the ultimate truth of things. That's a myth. Everyone is biased, whether that bias comes from the influence of our culture, how we're brought up, our friends, or the sin that harasses and deceives us. Everyone has an angle, an axe to grind, an agenda to promote.

This principle resounds in college classrooms. Professors often project an aura of neutrality and objectivity on worldview issues, as if they were above bias and prejudice. But rest assured, professors have not escaped the human condition. They operate out of one worldview or another, whether they admit it publicly or not.

This principle also applies in human relationships. Since nobody can be totally open-minded, the best any of us can do is try to be aware of our own worldview assumptions, to be honest with others about where we're coming from, and to be willing to respectfully listen to others' point of view. By doing so we can sharpen our own understanding, learn something new, and perhaps even make corrections.

In short, it's not just the Bible that demands allegiance to truth to the exclusion of other worldviews. All worldviews draw lines. All worldviews have "fundamentalist" exclusion factors working.

5. *Every worldview has strict and inflexible rules, or absolutes, that must never be broken.*

Normally when Christians speak of absolutes, they are speaking of moral absolutes such as "Thou shalt not steal"

(biblically speaking, the imperative "Thou shalt not" is a good indicator that a moral absolute is coming). When I talk about absolutes here, I'm talking about the foundational assumptions and internal logic that govern a particular worldview.

Absolutes—the strict, inflexible rules of each worldview—must be obeyed without fail. They are revealed in superstitions and daily rituals, in religious rulings or secular laws, in a general sense of moral propriety, in philosophical ideas, in discussions of what we can and can't "know" in definitions of important words, in taboos, or in mockery and ridicule. Absolutes are unmistakably present in every worldview.

And so it's not just Christian. Muslim, or Hindu fundamentalists who have strict, inflexible rules. No worldviews are value- or rule-free. All worldviews expect their rules to be followed, period.

Cutting Through All the Blah, Blah, Blah

With so many worldviews, so many voices, so many answers, so much spiritual clutter in our world, the choices are dizzying. Each worldview says something it considers profoundly true about the way things are. How on earth can we cut through all the verbiage and make sense of all these competing claims?

Just trying to establish a beginning point presents problems. The idea of worldview, and the worldviews themselves, can be sliced and diced in many ways. Nobody approaches the task with perfect neutrality.

Even so, it might not be as hard as it seems. Despite the uncountable worldview possibilities, all the worldview variations from whatever country,

philosophy, or religion can be boiled down to just a few basic variations.

If that sounds too simplistic, that's okay. I'm *trying* to simplify. I admit that what I'm about to show you is just one way of looking at worldviews. It might not be the best way. But at least it's a start, something you can get your mind around.

Naming the Worldview Animals

We're going to take the thousands of worldview "animals" and sort them into six basic classifications. If you can master these six—and it's easy to do—you'll be able to go anywhere in the wild world and quickly know the general worldview you're dealing with.

Here's the beauty of this approach: If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck . . . it's not likely to be a rhinoceros. You don't have to know all the technical Latin and Greek names for things. Just learn the basic characteristics and you'll be good to go.

A little caveat: I realize that the (hopefully) clever nicknames I'm giving the other worldviews here could seem unfair and pejorative. If you feel that way, I understand where you're coming from, and that's okay. Instead of taking mine, you can use the academic names or make up your own names for them. The point is to find words that work for you—terms that you can remember, that trigger associations in your mind about the distinctives of that particular worldview, and that give you a way of talking about it with other people who may or may not have a philosophical or theological background. If you can put these big ideas on your own lips, even if they're not in the formal terminology, you'll gain confidence and understanding.

The Haunted Worldview

The Haunted Worldview is the deep

structure behind most ancient religions. There are two basic ideas. (1) All things around us (rocks, hills, rivers, trees, animals, weather, sun, moon . . . rhododendrons, etc.) are animated by spirit beings. (2) There are gods or spirits, some of whom have major powers, who at any time might appear in the world. As best as the ancients could tell, the world was full of moody, capricious spirits who could quickly ruin your life. Religion—sometimes worshipping and hoping for the best, sometimes sacrificing just to get the gods off your back—was what people used to cope.

In academia, this outlook is known as *polytheism, animism, spiritism, paganism, and neopaganism*. On your xBox, you might have come across it in *World of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy*.

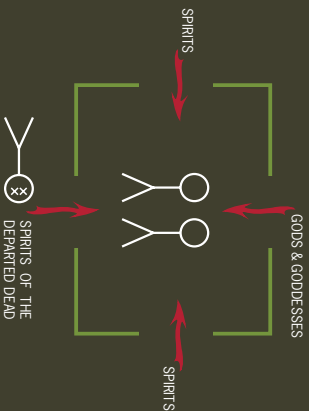
For some examples, think Greek and Roman mythology, the Gilgamesh Epic, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, African pre-Islamic or pre-Christian tribal religions, the Aztecs, Mayas, and other pre-Columbian peoples,





Diagram 1

THE HAUNTED WORLDVIEW



the Australian aborigines, and the religions in Europe and Asia before European expansion. For modern expressions, think Wicca, neopaganism, and witchcraft (spells and incantations to spirits to achieve certain effects).

In diagram 1, and the diagrams for the other worldviews, the stick figures in the center represent people like you and me—intelligent observers of their environment trying to figure things out. The rectangular box represents the physical world we experience every day. Notice the gaps: the material world surrounding has portals or windows into the supernatural, gates into the spiritual realm. Notice, too, that the figures have no arms or faces—this has no significance but does symbolize my inability to draw.

The figure lying down with X's in its eyes represents the brute fact of death. We emphasize with the ancients because we experience the same thing—the loss of loved ones and the knowledge that we, too, will die. Like us, the ancients

wondered what goes on beyond the grave. They believed the dead went to a place in or under the earth, kind of like a cave, a prison house where people were punished or kept in a semicomatose state.

Here are some characteristic sayings or attitudes connected to the Haunted Worldview:

- It doesn't matter what you believe or what spiritual path you take, as long as you experience something powerful that works for you.
- You can get valid spiritual guidance from astrologers, fortune-tellers, psychics, and mediums (those who seek to contact the departed dead).
- It is important to get in touch with the spirits in trees, rivers, hills, and sacred places.

The Biblical Worldview

The Biblical Worldview is God's self-revelation. It includes Christian faith, but it also includes God's revelation to the Jews prior to Christianity, since as the apostle Paul states in Romans 9—11, Christians have been grafted onto the root of Judaism.

The Biblical Worldview provides the core on which authentic Christian faith is based. This has been imperfectly perceived and somewhat diversely interpreted in Christian history, but it is well stated in the Apostles' Creed (Google this if you don't know it) and in the doctrine of the Trinity (the eternal God has always existed as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit).

Both the Biblical and the Haunted worldviews assume the reality of the physical and supernatural worlds. However, the Haunted Worldview urges us to try to get in touch with spiritual powers, wherever they are, including the departed dead. The Biblical Worldview says, "Get away from that ouija board! There is only one true God and he alone deserves worship. Do not trust in those other spirits."

If you look at the Bible's own story of Israel, you find that for much of biblical history Israel's sin showed itself in a propensity to drift back to worshipping the gods of polytheistic religions surrounding them (see 2 Kings 23:4-5, 7, 10, 13).

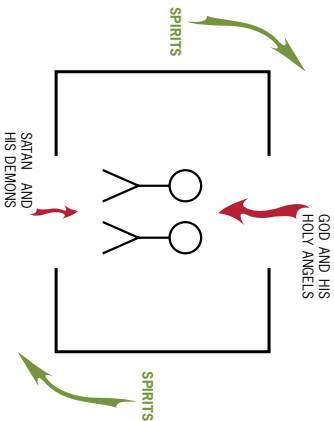
If you look at the Biblical Worldview illustration (diagram 2)

The Biblical Worldview says, "Get away from that ouija board! There is only one true God and he alone deserves worship. Do not trust in those other spirits."

it's similar to the Haunted Worldview, except that the nature spirits do not exist and the realm of the departed dead is off limits. God and Satan are enemies, but God is the sure winner and Satan the sure loser in this spiritual conflict (see Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 14:12-15; Luke 10:18; 1 John 3:8; and Revelation 12:9). Spiritual beings that lead us toward God are angels; spiritual beings that lead us away from God are demons. Satan and the demons—who as created beings cannot exist unless God permits them to exist—have much less power, authority, or scope of activity than God (hence the small arrow).

Diagram 2

THE BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW



Where in history can the Biblical Worldview be found? Obviously, it is taught in the Old and New Testaments.

Here are some characteristic sayings or attitudes connected to the Biblical Worldview:

- "Have no other gods before me" (in the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:3).

- "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" . . .
- "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).
- God is good. He loves you.
- "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

The What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get Worldview

This worldview says that the physical, material, natural world—what we experience with our five senses—is the only solid reality. According to this worldview, religious and spiritual explanations or doctrines are imaginary superstitions, illusions, or wishful thinking having nothing to do with what is real or knowable. As a shortcut, we'll refer to this view with the unwieldy but usable acronym WYSIWYG, or "whizzy-wig."

Academic names for this worldview include *materialism* (the idea that nature is all there is), *materialism* (the belief that the material world is all there is), and *atheism* (the belief that there is no God). *Agnosticism* (the belief that we don't know or can't be sure there is a God) should also be included in this category because agnostics make daily decisions as if the WYSIWYG worldview were true.

For decades the WYSIWYG worldview has been dominant in colleges and universities and among elite opinion makers.

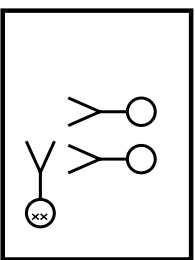
As you look at the WYSIWYG worldview (diagram 3), the figures in the box represent people trying to make sense of their world. But this time the

box representing the physical, material, natural world is hemmed in by a solid line. The WYSIWYG worldview reduces everything to a closed system of physical causes and effects. Nothing real exists outside the box, neither gods, God, angels, demons, the souls of the departed dead, heaven, nor hell. This worldview is hermetically sealed against the supernatural. Even if God did a miracle in front of their eyes, these materialists would have to explain it away in naturalistic terms according to the strict, inflexible rules of their worldview—attributing the unexplainable to extra-terrestrials for example.

Notice what this worldview does to our humanity. We become mere cosmic accidents, here as a result of time, chance, and matter. When we die, that's it. There's no lasting meaning, purpose, or value to life.

Diagram 3

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET



This worldview leads directly to moral relativism. Since any one person's or culture's perspective is as good as any other's, there's no way to say with compelling authority that anything is ever objectively right or wrong in all times and places. You can't even say with authority that the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide was wrong. All we have are opinions, man-made laws, social norms, prejudices, and personal tastes and whims—any sense of universal morals, virtue, truth, or beauty are terminated.

Yet (and this is really important because it speaks to who were are as human beings, marked by the image of God within us) even those who hold to this view and who believe in a Creator-free universe are often awestruck by the mystery of their existence and the world around them. They may sense that they are part of something greater than themselves that is unknowable. They may feel that life and time are incredibly valuable. They may feel that their actions have purpose because they affect those who live in the here and now and those who live on after they die. Although their worldview says there is no ultimate meaning, the image of God within them intensely yearns to give meaning to their lives.

Here are a few characteristic sayings or attitudes of the WYSIWYG worldview:

- There are absolutely no absolutes. Everything is relative.
- You can trust only what can be seen, felt, heard, tasted, or smelled through our five senses—that's it.
- I believe in Science not religion.
- There is no Truth, only truths.
- Think globally, Act Locally. (Not really, but I felt like I should attribute this expression to someone)

The Dueling-Yodas Worldview

In 1977, George Lucas released the first film in his *Star Wars* double trilogy. One of the heroes in *Star Wars* is the diminutive Yoda, a yoda-like master who knows the ways of the Force better than anyone else and who (for a Muppet) wields a mean light saber. Since this worldview's nickname is in the plural, it might help to imagine a Yoda and an anti-Yoda spinning and parrying—Muppets locked in mortal combat.

Lucas intended to create a mythology for our time, an epic morality play on the battle between good and evil, on the effects of courage and compromise. To achieve his vision, Lucas introduced us to the Force, a mysterious power or energy divided between a Dark Side and an unnamed good side. In the course of the story these two sides of the Force weigh in like a reefer-totter tipping the fortunes of the protagonists.

The technically correct name for this worldview is *cosmic dualism*—cosmic for vast, eternal principles; *dualism* for "two." The chief historical example of cosmic dualism is Persian Zoroastrianism, in which the good god Ahura Mazda (or Ohrmazd) fought against the evil god Angra Mainyu (or Ahriman). Zoroastrianism was an ethical dualism because it focused on human choices. A different type of dualism is found in the Chinese religion of Taoism (also called Daoism),

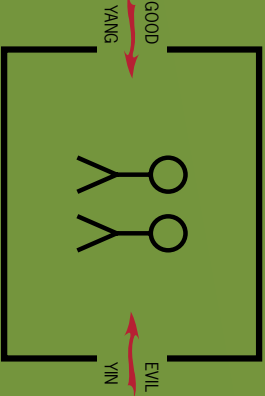
which supposes an eternal, dynamic tension or balance between yin and yang.

Also, in the first four centuries after Christ, the religion of Manichaeism tried to solve the problem of evil (how can an all-powerful and good God allow suffering in the world?) by blending Christian and Zoroastrian ideas. As a result the Manichaeans rejected God's omnipotence and elevated Satan's status to that of an uncreated, self-existent entity equal in power to God.

The diagram of the bipolar worldview of the Dueling-Yodas (diagram 4) shows a box representing the physical world, with figures inside, and again my figures have no arms or faces. Unlike the What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get world (which rejects any transculatural moral absolutes) the Dueling-Yodas world can be seen as a moral universe, a battlefield for the constant duel between good and evil (or a tug-of-war between the forces of yin and yang). The good and evil principles may be conceived of as personal (a good god versus an evil god) or impersonal (a good force versus an evil force). Each human being must choose which side to follow: to be moral, a person must master his or her passions and make the right choices.

Diagram 4

THE DUELING YODAS WORLDVIEW



Here are some sayings and attitudes from the Dueling-Yodas Worldview:

- Two dogs are fighting within me. The one that wins is the one I feel the most (possible Native American origin).
- Train yourself to be indifferent to pleasure or pain (Stoicism).
- Humankind is caught in a no-win situation (Cynicism).

you are essentially no different from a blade of grass or that cockroach over there. All are equally God or a part of God.

Omnipresent Supergalactic Oneness

The 1995 comedy *Mr. Ventura: When Nature Calls* opens with a parody. The head monk of an ashram somewhere in the Himalayas gets rid of Jim Carey's character (Ace Ventura) by telling him that he had achieved his meditation goal of "omnipresent supergalactic oneness." The parody here is based upon the widely held belief in Hinduism and forms of Buddhism that all is one and that everything is spirit. Not to be mistaken for a distinct and personal God, whom Carey plays in *Brave Ahimsa*.

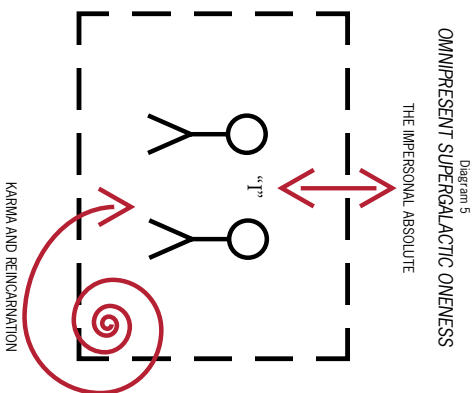
Academic names for this worldview are *pantheism* (the belief that all is God or all is spirit), *homon* (the belief that everything is connected because it is all part of the One), and *monism* (the belief that everything is one).

The basic monistic idea is that God and you are one. The basic biblical idea is that God alone is God and you're not him.

Note that in the diagram (diagram 5) the lines of the box are hash marks. This represents the idea of this worldview that the physical world is only apparently real and its essence is spirit or mind. In this worldview the barrier between the physical and the spiritual is illusory. Your mind is supposed to create its own reality—the only reality that matters.

The large "I" between the stick figures represents the pantheistic idea that we are all divine, or at least we are all part of God. All you have to do is look within yourself to find "God." Since according to Omnipresent Supergalactic Oneness *everything is God*, you are essentially no different from a blade of grass or that cockroach over there. All are equally God or a part of God.

The spiral swirl represents this worldview's belief about what happens when we die: the soul is "born again" (recycled) in a new body, to live thousands or millions of lives on its way to eternal (and guaranteed) union with the One. Not every monist believes in karma and reincarnation, but on the whole this belief is characteristic among monists and pantheists.



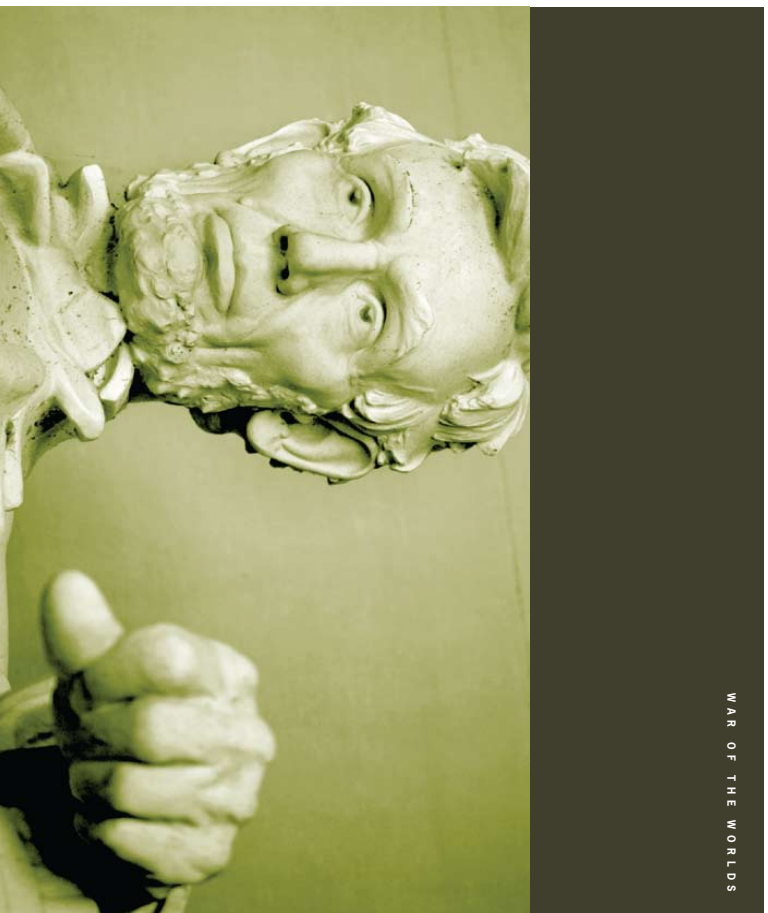
Here are some typical sayings and attitudes of Omnipresent Supergalactic Oneness:

- You can do anything if you just believe in yourself.
- The "Christ" is already within you; you just need to realize it.
- All spiritual paths lead to the same destination.
- What goes around comes around (referring to karma and reincarnation).

Designer Religion

A lot of people today do not consider themselves to be a part of any organized religion or thought-out philosophy. They like to pull from various traditions and come up with a religion of their own. It's known by various names: *religious syncretism*, *the New Age movement*, *the Age of Aquarius*, *new religions*, and *a new religious consciousness*. I call it Designer Religion.

As the absence of a diagram 6 illustrates, this worldview is whatever you want it to be. Here you can worship an earthworm, believe your dog embodies the departed soul of Abraham



Lincoln and still attend a church service on Sunday. Designer Religions cobble together different religions, philosophies, and whims into personally customized spiritualities. The result is full of different kinds of religious, scientific, pseudoscientific, psychological, philosophical, and spiritual babble that may be incompatible with each other. It's like going to a cafeteria with an all-you-can-eat buffet and being offered dishes like Sweet-and-Sour Krum and Eggs Foo Schmitzel.

Designer Religion is actually not a separate worldview category but a faux worldview because, as a matter of fact, if you're into Designer Religion, you cannot avoid "cramping" in the Hammett, the Durling-Yodas, or the Omnipresent Supergalactic worldview. As you bring in diverse ideas and spiritual practices, you're basically making them fit into your main preferred worldview.

One big attraction of Designer Religion, aside from the benefit of being able to think of oneself as rather creative

and cosmopolitan, is *no guilt*. Since you are customizing your own religion to suit yourself, there are no more outside constraints—you can do whatever you want.

Here are some characteristic sayings and attitudes of this pseudo worldview:

- I'm not into organized religion.
- I'm spiritual, not religious.
- Whatever works for you.
- As long as it doesn't hurt anybody. . . .

Note: Islam claims to be the true version of monotheism. And if you look at it superficially, Islam does appear to be a little like the monotheism of the Old and New Testaments. However, Islam rejects so many key affirmations of the Biblical Worldview that it cannot properly be included in that worldview, though it borrows much from it. We therefore

need to place Islam here, as a Designer Religion, that is, as a version—and distortion—of the Biblical Worldview.

A Six-Pack Is All You Need

That's it—six are all you need. And the great thing about this six-pack of worldviews is this: you don't have to spend years studying religion and philosophy to know where people are coming from. Now you can unlock the secrets of every philosophy, religion, or worldview perspective that comes your way! No matter what the situation, you'll be able to start breaking things down.

In every new class, you'll be thinking, *What is this teacher's worldview?* For the books you'll read, you'll be wondering, *What worldview is this author trying to get across?* When you see a film, you'll wonder, *What worldview is this movie promoting?* When you listen to music, you'll ask yourself, *Which worldview is this group fronting for?* When you watch or read or listen to the media, your antennae will be out: *Which worldview?* And when you're talking to your friends or co-workers, you will have a much better idea of what they're talking about.

In the marketplace of ideas, one of the most powerful things we can do for the gospel is to bring these worldview assumptions into the light of day, point out that they are in fact assumptions and not settled facts, set those assumptions side by side with God's truth and the basic assertions of the Biblical Worldview, and then let the Holy Spirit do his work in people's minds and hearts.

- that God is not silent or indifferent to us but has communicated clearly to us through nature, the history and prophets of Israel, the promise of the Messiah and fulfillment in Christ, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and the church
- that we are created in God's image and therefore we (men and women of whatever caste, tribe, or social standing) have innate dignity, value, and worth
- that social justice is important because it is important to God
- that God *loves you* and proved it by sending his Son to die for you on the cross to purchase forgiveness for your sins and eternal salvation
- that because God has forgiven us in Christ we have the power to forgive others
- that our lives have ultimate meaning and purpose
- that God guarantees that Truth exists and is knowable by us (at least in part)

- that God can wipe away our tears and we can have victory over death through Christ's resurrection
- These are not idle talking points. They speak powerfully to our deepest needs as human beings. Small wonder that wherever in the world the gospel is preached—even where there is great persecution—people respond. Compared to the alternatives, the Biblical Worldview has no comparisons.

The Image Is Everything

To maintain that the Biblical Worldview is the best for explaining our humanity and our place in the universe does not mean that everything about the other worldviews is wrong. In fact, there are some significant areas of agreement between the Biblical and the other worldviews. These areas of agreement are based upon the fact that all of us were created by God.

Despite all the differences in culture, language, history, and ethnicities, we all share a common human experience rooted in the fact that each of us is created in God's image. That image of God in each of us produces a yearning for truth, goodness, justice, nobility, worth, belonging, and many other basic things. When we tap into the image of God in ourselves and in other people, when we can relate to them as one human being to another, God can work through us in amazing ways.

Quiz Show

A benefit of understanding the major worldviews is that it makes at least some of those perennially difficult questions, whether from hard skeptics or honest inquirers (or ourselves), easier to respond to.

Let's take just one example. One of the Big Questions that comes up in spiritual conversations is, how could a good God allow such massive suffering in the world? The further development of the question is this: because of innocent suffering, God cannot be both all good and all powerful. You have to give up something. Either God has to get weaker or God must become less good.

Now, if the only resources you have to answer this question are from within the Biblical Worldview, it's a hard question. But let's compare how the problem of innocent suffering plays out in the other worldviews.

In naturalism, some innocents may suffer, but it has nothing to do with God. It's just their dumb, bad luck.

In paganism, innocents suffer because wittingly or unwittingly they got on the gods' bad side. Again, they're plain out of luck.

In pantheism, with karma and reincarnation, there is no possibility of innocent suffering. Your suffering in this life is exactly proportionate to your wrongdoing in your previous life or lives. You're getting exactly what you deserve, no more and no less.

In cosmic dualism, suffering is an illusion; the real evil is the unenlightened way you perceive the world.

Within Designer Religion, you're making things up according to one of the other spiritual camps, so no new insight can be forthcoming from that perspective.

So the *only* reason that innocent suffering is a problem within the Biblical Worldview is the tension between these two equally important ideas: God's loving goodness and God's great power. Within this context, we can see that the biblical answer affirms that there is such a thing as innocent suffering. It's not that we bring it all on ourselves or that it's not real or that it's all in our mind but that most suffering comes about because God loves us enough to give us moral freedom and real choices on how we are going to act. Nor does God watch from afar, aloof from our suffering, but has participated in it by becoming a man and becoming vulnerable to human sin to the point of suffering on the cross for us. The

biblical answer doesn't whitewash the problem and provides a much more satisfying intellectual framework for grappling with evil than any of the other worldviews.

How to Talk to Absolutely Anybody

Once you've internalized these worldview concepts, you'll be able to engage in spiritual conversations with a great deal more confidence. You'll be ready to apply the following principles in sharing your faith.

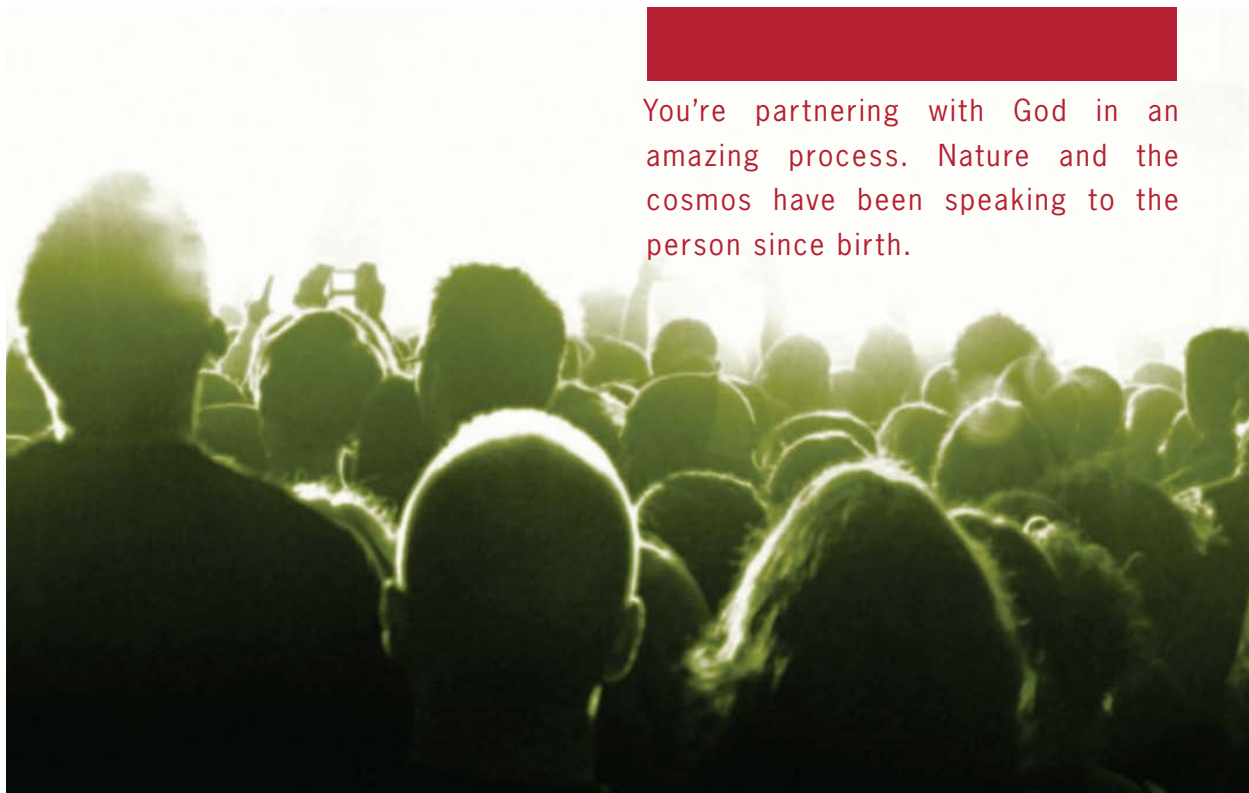
- Realize that we are all made up of stories that are important to God. By showing interest in others' stories, we're entering into the Great Conversation about what's real and important. We're also honoring others and God's image in them.
- Learn the art of conversation as gentle, genuine curiosity in others. And learn the value of small talk. Small talk creates space in conversation to share the big hope within you (1 Peter 3:15).
- Becoming a fascinating person means getting other people to talk about what interests them! If we have the right attitude, we can learn something from just about anyone.
- In conversations, be alert to the worldview opinions people have—however and whenever those opinions are expressed. The objective is not to stock an arsenal of winning arguments to blow falsehoods out of the water or impress others with our great insights; it's to concentrate on honest and other-centered engagement. Let your knowledge of worldviews facilitate genuine conversations.
- Don't freak out if people act like non-Christians. Don't be threatened by disagreements or

misinformation about Christian faith. Don't take professions of religiousness at face value, as if that's the end of the story. And never be ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16-17) because, in the marketplace of worldviews, there's absolutely *nothing* to be ashamed of!

- Finally, do pay for people and for God's wisdom in talking to people. Do listen and try to enter into genuine back-and-forth conversation. Do offer to pay for others when they share a need in their life, as you're led by the Holy Spirit. Do know how to introduce someone to Christ in a simple and understandable way. And do give the person time to process the message of the gospel—not everybody comes to Christ at the same pace or on the same timetable.

The basic idea is that in any evangelistic encounter it's not just about you trying





You're partnering with God in an amazing process. Nature and the cosmos have been speaking to the person since birth.

to convince another person to accept the gospel. Rather, you're partnering with God in an amazing process. Nature and the cosmos have been speaking to the person since birth (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:20). God's Word, sharper than any two-edged sword, has been revealing hearts and motives (Hebrews 4:12). Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God, is the most powerful and attractive person in all of history (1 Corinthians 1:24). God uses circumstances and other people to show us our need for him.

In short, at all times God has already been at work through his Holy Spirit:

- giving us spiritual hunger and drawing us to himself (John 12:32)
- showing us our need for forgiveness (John 16:8-11)
- opening our hearts to receive the gospel (Acts 14:27; 16:14)
- enabling us to be born again (John 1:12)
- adopting us as sons and daughters into God's family (Galatians 4:5),
- regenerating our spirits (Titus 3:5)
- giving us the desire to serve God (2 Thessalonians 1:11)
- empowering us (Acts 1:8)
- helping us to pray (Romans 8:26)

And God's doing these things not just for us but for others, too.

God's Holy Spirit is the ultimate persuader and enabler. Therefore, an essential part of decoding a person's worldview is depending on the Holy Spirit. When we do that, we can trust that God is using us as we talk with confidence to absolutely anybody.

Bayard Taylor spent four years on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ at Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois). He's participated in several short-term cross-cultural missions projects (Chicago's inner city, Poland, India, a country in the Middle East, and Albania); earned a master of divinity degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; and served a stint as a biblical and theological editor for a Christian publishing house. The author of *Blah, Blah, Blah: Making Sense of the World's Spiritual Chatter* (Bethany House) and the accompanying website blahblahbook.com, he's taught worldviews for CRU movements at Brown University, the University of Kentucky, and the Great Lakes Region winter conference—and he's available to come speak at your campus. He can be contacted at bayard@bayardtayloronline.com.



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